

Opening Statement of Rep. Kiley (I-CA)

Education and Workforce Committee

Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Subcommittee

Field of Fees: Private Equity's Role in the Commercialization of
American Youth Sports

June 30, 2026

(As prepared for delivery)

As this Subcommittee discussed last December, youth sports remain one of the best investments we can make in the next generation. They help children develop physical health, mental resilience, discipline, and essential life skills.

There is encouraging news. New data from Project Play shows youth sports participation has rebounded from COVID-era lows, with 58 percent of children now playing sports. While that represents meaningful progress, too many families still face unnecessary barriers to participation.

Over the past decade youth sports have become increasingly commercialized. What was once an experience made possible through local leagues, volunteer coaches, and community recreation has, in many places, evolved into a business model that asks families to spend more every year. Average family spending on a child's primary sport

increased 46 percent between 2019 and 2024 and is likely even higher today.

Recent investigative reporting has highlighted certain practices that deserve closer examination. In some markets, consolidation is driving up costs for families while limiting access to more affordable, community-based options. In many cases, families face a “pay more or quit” dynamic if they want their children to continue playing.

Some operators have used strategies that prioritize revenue over participation. Families report higher fees, mandatory add-on costs, stay-to-play requirements that force them to book hotels and lodging through affiliated partners, vertical integration that requires participation in the same operator’s leagues, tournaments, camps, and streaming services. These practices can limit consumer choice while making youth sports more expensive.

The consequences are clear: a widening participation gap. In 2012, there was a 13.6 percentage point difference in regular sports participation between children from homes earning under \$25,000 and those from homes earning \$100,000 or more. By 2024, that gap had grown to 20.2 percentage points.

Too many children are being priced out. It’s not that they lack talent or determination. It’s that their families simply cannot afford the rising costs.

Parents recognize this trend. A recent survey found that 73 percent believe youth sports have lost sight of the core mission of fostering fun and developing teamwork, while 61 percent believe organizations now

put profits ahead of that mission. At the same time too many young athletes are led to believe that sports only matter if they results in a college scholarship or professional career. That, of course, misses their true value: healthier kids and stronger families.

It is important to recognize that commercialization itself is not the problem. Private investment has helped address real gaps created by declining local investment in parks and recreation. Many responsible operators have expanded access, improved facilities, and created more opportunities for young athletes. Capital, when invested responsibly, can broaden access and participation.

Our concern is with particular practices that reduce competition, drive up costs, and limit access for families. Simply put, we should encourage models that expand opportunity while discouraging practices that leave parents with fewer choices and higher bills.

Today's hearing will examine both sides of this dynamic. We will hear about practices that have driven up costs and reduced access to affordable, community-based options. We will also hear about successful examples involving private investment, traditional nonprofits, and community-based models that are expanding participation while keeping costs manageable. I look forward to the testimony of our witnesses and to a constructive discussion about how youth sports can remain affordable, accessible, and focused on what matters most: giving every child the opportunity to play.