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Building Strong Children Through School/Community Based Youth Sports

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Chairman, Ranking Member, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.

Frederick Douglass once said, “It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men.” That single line captures why I believe youth sports deserve focused national attention. When we get youth sports right, we build strong children. When we leave participation to chance, we miss one of our greatest opportunities to prepare young people for the demands of adulthood.

For more than 30 years, I have worked at the intersection of education, counseling, and youth sports. I began my career as a school counselor and coach, and later co-founded 2-4-1 Sports, a nonprofit that partners with schools, districts, and community organizations across the United States and internationally to expand access to play and to use sport as a tool for building physical literacy, character, and resilience. Through school based, after school, and community programs, 2-4-1 has served thousands of children across multiple states and countries, with a focus on reaching young people who would otherwise have limited or no access to organized sport.

Our work has been recognized by the Aspen Institute, which identified 2-4-1 as an early national model for sport sampling and for helping children grow through sport rather than specialize too soon. We also maintain partnerships with national governing bodies connected to the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic (USOPC) movement to introduce children to a wide range of sports they might not otherwise experience. In addition, I currently serve as a contributor to a national youth sports position being developed by researchers and USOPC members with the National Athletic Training Association, reflecting a growing consensus around the importance of early, developmentally appropriate access to sport.

This perspective is shaped by decades spent inside schools, on fields, and in community centers, and by listening closely to young people, families, and educators across very different communities.That is why national awareness and leadership matter. They can support local efforts by highlighting proven school- and community-based models and encouraging affordable, sustainable programs that keep sports fun and accessible for families.

Earlier this fall, I had the privilege of meeting at the Pentagon with leaders from the Military Community and Family Policy office who were exploring ways to strengthen youth sports programming for military-connected children. Their focus was clear and consistent with what I see in schools across the country. They want children to grow up strong, confident, resilient, and physically prepared for whatever paths they choose in life, and they see youth sports as one of the most effective ways to support a healthy and ready future force. That interest is already translating into action. Just last week, Mr. Stephen Simmons, Deputy Assistant Secretary of War for Military Community and Family Policy, signed formal guidance to installation commanders and youth program leaders aligning youth fitness and sports programming with the Executive Order that revitalized the President's Council on Sports, Fitness, and Nutrition. The guidance emphasizes age-appropriate, fun, participation-focused programming, strong partnerships with schools and community organizations, effective use of existing facilities, and professional development for youth program staff, all designed to strengthen health, readiness, and long-term well-being. It is a strong example of how national priorities can move quickly into local implementation and why this conversation matters far beyond the military, reaching communities across the country.

That concern is now being echoed clearly at the national level. The recent *Make America Healthy Again* Commission report states plainly that "*rates of obesity, chronic disease, inactivity, and poor nutrition among America's youth are at crisis levels, threatening the economic vitality, military readiness, academic achievement, and national morale of the United States*." What I see every day in schools and communities confirms that reality. These challenges are not theoretical. They show up in classrooms, on playgrounds, and in the lives of children who either lack access to sport-based play or are being pushed too hard to specialize, too early.

That is why the President's recent Executive Order 14327, reestablishing the President's Council on Sports, Fitness, and Nutrition and the Presidential Fitness Test, has such promise. The Order emphasizes a national commitment to prioritize and expand children's participation in youth sports and active play, set bold and innovative fitness goals for young Americans, and expand opportunities at the global, national, State, and local levels for participation in sports and physical fitness. This represents an incredible opportunity to cast a wide net across the entire country. If implemented thoughtfully and in partnership with schools and communities, it could serve as a powerful accelerant for youth sport participation and physical activity, with long-lasting implications for health, readiness, and long-term success. From my perspective, this reflects a growing recognition that youth sports are not extracurricular. They are foundational and essential.

To understand how 2-4-1 got started, it helps to know that its origins are deeply personal. When my oldest daughter was eight, we were told she was the number one prospect for a local travel soccer team. During that same conversation, everything changed. I asked the coach about spring conflicts because she was showing some initial interest in lacrosse. The moment he learned she might want to play another sport, she went from "number 1 prospect" to "we're no longer interested." She was eight years old.

That moment became the origin of our organization when my wife Kerry and I came up with the tagline “Life’s 2 Short 4 Just 1 Sport”. It also highlights one of the two major challenges facing youth sports in America. In many middle and upper middle income communities, children are pushed to specialize far too early. They play too many refereed games at ages when they're taught that outcomes matter more than athletic development or learning. They lose chances to problem solve, develop empathy, and learn from mistakes. And as a former late bloomer myself, I can tell you we are losing an entire population of children who simply need time to catch up physically with their peers.

The other world looks very different. In many low-income communities, children have almost no access to sports at all. According to the Aspen Institute, children from families earning under $25,000 a year are half as likely to participate regularly in youth sports as their peers from higher income households. For these children, overspecialization is not the problem. The problem is access. Cost, transportation, and the absence of neighborhood based opportunities stand in the way.

These two worlds are sometimes only miles apart, but could not appear more different. The solution however, is the same. Youth sports should begin where kids already are - and kids are at schools. Whether public, private, parochial, or charter, schools are the most reliable and efficient recreation centers in every community. Nearly every school has a gym, most have at least some blacktop, and many have fields or green space. When we bring play-based, low barrier sport programming into schools before and after the academic day, participation grows, confidence grows, and the benefits spread throughout the entire school community.

As a former counselor and coach, I often said I did more counseling when I was coaching and more coaching when I was counseling. Youth sports are one of the most powerful settings we have for teaching resilience, emotional regulation, conflict resolution, leadership, and teamwork. But for sports to play that role, we must be intentional about both access and adult leadership.

At 2-4-1, we work both top down and bottom up. At the national level, we help shape conversations that place play, physical literacy, and mental health at the center of youth development. At our core, however, we are grassroots programmers. Through summer sport sampling camps and school-based before and after school programs, children have daily opportunities to try new sports, move, and belong.

These programs use our TOP Self Sports approach. TOP stands for Thinking On Purpose. It is a research-backed, evidence-based model that teaches self-regulation and resilience through sport-based play. The data we collect across communities shows that the model works. Its strength is in its simplicity. Kids play, reflect, and learn not only sport skills, but how to move from how they feel to how they want to feel. In short, they learn that managing emotional responses may be one of the most important lessons sports can teach.

That is why access and timing matter. In communities where children are pushed to specialize before age twelve, we need on-ramps that allow them to try multiple sports and rediscover the joy of play. In communities where access is the challenge, we need to remove barriers. If we do

not create these opportunities, children will seek connection elsewhere, often in ways that do not support their well-being.

As both an educator and a parent, the hours that concerned me most were from three to six in the afternoon. As a parent, I knew where my own kids were. As a counselor, I did not always know where my students were. Children who lacked structure, a place to be, and a sense of belonging were far more likely to drift into risky situations. That is why it makes sense to build programs where children already are. When we train teachers to be coaches and create opportunities for play before and after school, we provide safe, structured environments during the hours when kids need them most.

This approach is both prevention and intervention. It is also a smart use of resources because it addresses challenges we can see coming rather than waiting to repair damage later. When I look at young people participating in our programs across the country, including here in Washington DC, I see what becomes possible when communities treat play, belonging, and healthy development not as luxuries, but as foundations.

The good news is that we do not need separate solutions for overspecialization and lack of access. A school and community centered approach strengthens both sides of the system. It gives children in high pressure environments a chance to rediscover balance and joy, and it gives children with limited opportunities a chance to begin. It builds strong children before we must repair that which is broken. It also positions schools to serve as the community recreation centers they were always capable of being.

One of the most urgent challenges I see in schools today is attendance. One way to improve attendance is to give children a reason to want to be in school. When programming is fun, engaging, and relationship driven, kids show up. Our school and community based sport sampling programs have produced strong outcomes in this area. Teachers report higher attendance on the days we run TOP Self Sports, and principals tell us that students who were chronically absent begin showing up because they do not want to miss the chance to play, learn, and belong. This single intervention improves school culture and strengthens the foundation on which all other learning depends.

A school centered approach does more than expand access to sports. It supports academic recovery, strengthens mental health, builds community, and gives young people a safe and positive place to be during the hours when they need it most.

Thank you for your time and for your commitment to supporting and growing youth sport participation in the U.S.