

Written Testimony of

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Chairman Kiley, Ranking Member Bonamici, thank you for inviting me to testify today about the changing nature of modern youth sports. My name is Linda Flanagan, and I’m the author of *Take Back the Game: How Money and Mania Are Ruining Kids’ Sports—and Why It Matters*. I began studying youth sports long before my book was published and have continued my immersion in the subject since. My experiences as a high school running coach, mother of three, erstwhile competitive runner, and, most important, career as a freelance writer, inform my perspective below. My intention is to offer you a holistic view of the youth sports universe.

Since my book came out in 2022, I’ve spoken to parents, coaches, school administrators, athletic directors, sports medicine doctors, and many, many young people about the state of play. What I hear from them is anxiety about the pressure families are under; worry about the future of school sports programs; and alarm over the surge in injuries among kids at ever younger ages. Investors, on the other hand, are giddy about expansion in the youth sports industry, one senior executive recently proclaiming that the youth sport market was “limitless.” It’s those on the receiving end of this investing who are struggling to make sense of it all. Most kids, of course, when allowed to play for fun and compete with their friends in environments that nourish their needs, treasure their sports experience.

One of the most prominent scholars of the youth sports ecosystem is Dr. Neeru Jayanthi, the Director of Emory Sports Medicine Research and Education in Atlanta. Here’s how he described the evolution in kids’ athletics: “Youth sports participation has evolved from child-driven, recreational free play for enjoyment, to adult-driven, highly structured, deliberate practice devoted to sports-specific skill development.” Another way of looking at it: Less than 30 years ago, kids often started participating in recreational sports at about age 8. Today, it’s not uncommon for 8-year-olds to compete for national titles. Consider that this is all taking place in a fragmented, largely ungoverned space.

Our youth sports universe is one of feast or famine. In low-income communities, opportunities to play have diminished. Decreased local funding for parks and recreation departments has contributed to this, accelerating after the financial crisis in 2007/2008. Kids in these areas who do play start later and quit sooner. A third of the lowest income high schools offer no sports teams at all. In these areas, there's a sports *famine*. Where sports are most needed, they're most lacking. Childhood obesity rates are highest in low-income areas and the problem worsened during the pandemic. By contrast, in middle-and upper-income areas, there's *feasting* on youth sports. Here, where, in some cases, private clubs and leagues have swooped in to replace the community teams that preceded them, there's competitive pressure on young children to pick one sport and specialize in it at younger and younger ages. In my community, for example, the area soccer club offers a "Junior Pre-Academy" program for "U-3s." That would be 2-year-olds.

How We Got Here

Let me start with some facts: roughly 27.3 million children aged 6-17 played on a team or took sports lessons in 2023. As of 2024, the participation rate had climbed to 58 percent, about what it had been before the pandemic. Children in the wealthiest, most educated households play the most organized sports, and those from the lowest-income, less educated homes play the least.

Youth sports are an ecosystem: an interconnected world with various actors, where one constituency's actions can flow through and shape another's—and the system itself. There's no one on top manipulating the gears. The introduction of big money into kids' activities, government policies, and shifts in parenting culture, and among other developments, all play a role.

Commercialization

Commercialization has changed youth sports. While business has always been involved in kids' athletics, the nature and extent of it has ballooned in recent years. The surge in private clubs, travel teams, extravagant sports facilities and now elaborate technology and specialized sports academies brings with it adults who depend on these jobs for their livelihood. Sports sociologist Jay Coakley explains how the selling of specialization works: in need of year-round income, with utility bills and paid staff, private clubs, leagues, and sports academies insist that year-round play in a single sport is essential, indeed the best way forward for aspiring young players. Thus, the commercialization of kids' athletics has compelled children to burrow into one sport at an early age, or, with specialized sports academies, to abandon traditional schools for full immersion in athletics.

More recently, private investment firms and other sophisticated investors have taken an interest. One private investor said in March of 2024 that, "there is almost an insatiable demand for youth sports experiences. What exists today is a fraction of what we think the potential is."

Parents will pay what they must in order to keep their children involved. The Aspen Institute's Sports & Society program found that individual families spend a little over \$1,000 for each

child's main sport, and close to \$500 for the child's second sport. This represents a cost increase of 46 percent since 2019, and many families pay far more. Parents also devote more than 3 hours *per day* to their kids' athletics each day their child has a practice or game. In all, families spend about \$40 billion per year on their offspring's sports, signaling to investors that parents will spare no expense for their children's athletic prospects.

Private investment, in some cases, has been especially worrisome, because it introduces extremely sophisticated financial engineers with generally short horizons into children's activities that are best served by a long-term perspective. Suggesting that PE and other large investors care deeply about kids reflects confusion about their purpose. Their priority is investor return, not child welfare or development.

Since my book came out, I've been stunned by the surge in big investor interest in youth sports. When I asked one PE firm why they began buying up youth sports organizations, the man said, "There were few barriers to entry." The fragmented, largely unregulated nature of the business makes it an appealing industry to penetrate.

The *Youth Sports Business Report* tracks these developments. Here are a few recent stories, to give you a flavor of the commerce:

- "Phoenix is getting a new multi-sport complex this fall, with Fire 'n' Ice Sports Arena opening Sept. 1 after over \$180 million in investment, including two NHL rinks, basketball courts, a fitness center, dining, a roughly 100-room hotel, and an integrated accredited high school academy. CEO Shubham Pandey, who locked in \$183 million in phase-two funding last November to finish the build, says the hockey-centric, education-paired model is one he plans to replicate six times across the southern belt, starting in Arizona." (June 15, 2026)
- "Gareth Bale has teamed with private-equity firm Juggernaut Capital to launch Juggernaut Diversified Sports, a sub-\$1 billion fund targeting men's, women's, and youth sports teams and leagues across North America and Europe. Juggernaut already owns youth sports operator 3STEP Sports and says it's within about 60 days of its first professional women's team deal, while Bale signaled that his long-running pursuit of third-tier Cardiff City stays alive but uncommitted." (June 17, 2026)
- "Greensboro is hosting more than 12,000 athletes across three national youth and amateur events this weekend, a slate projected to deliver over \$22 million in economic impact for local hotels, restaurants, and businesses. The lineup spans the World Ninja League Championships, Adidas Outdoor Track Nationals at North Carolina A&T, and the ECNL Regional League Playoffs, reinforcing the city's "Tournament Town" reputation as sports tourism remains its largest visitor-economy segment." (June 19, 2026)

I am not an investor or an economics professor, nor am I a student of finance; I cannot weigh in on the wisdom of these investments. What I can tell you is the effect of this money on kids

who are shut out of sports and those who play. Whether intentionally or not, commercial entities who profit off youth sports are selling a story about what kids need—and it's usually new, more, better. At the same time, some companies provide vital services that benefit families and expand access to children. Ankored, for example, is a technology firm that helps sports organizations at all levels uphold their safety and compliance requirements. LeagueApps, a sports management platform, created a 501(c)(3) specifically to fund sports organizations in underserved areas; the company allocates a portion of its annual gross revenue to the foundation. And RCX Sports is a national youth sports organization that connects professional leagues to local programs like YMCAs and Parks and Recreation departments, offering them education, training, and financial aid.

Policy

In her book *More than Play: How Law, Policy, and Politics Shape Youth Sports*, Professor Dionne Koller illuminates how the Amateur Sports Act of 1978, which established the modern version of what is now known as the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Committee, granted the USOPC a monopoly over Olympic (and later Paralympic) movement sports in the U.S., including youth sports that were covered by National Governing Bodies. The USOPC and NGBs were also charged with developing grassroots sports opportunities. Ostensibly, the USOPC and sport governing bodies were meant to cultivate players from the grassroots up. But as a practical matter, the USOPC lacked the resources and power to meaningfully fund and oversee youth sports organizations, turning responsibility for kids' sports to the private sector and hoping for the best.

Title IX also altered the landscape, famously bringing more girls into sports. The Women's Sports Foundation reported that 300,000 girls played high school sports in 1972, the year the legislation was passed. Fifty years later, there were 3.4 million. The explosion of sports options for girls has trickled down to the youth level, increasing demand for playing opportunities. Girls' sports have always been of interest to me, as I coached the teenage variety for years, and am the mother of a full-fledged adult woman now. They deserve the same opportunities to play as boys, but the commercialized nature of youth sports has been especially damaging to them.

Parent Culture

Also influencing the sports ecosystem are changes in parenting norms. These shifts began to emerge during the 1970s, altering the way parents engage with and consider their children. In his book *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood*, historian Steven Mintz identifies three major ones: reconfigured family life due to higher divorce rates and more single and working mothers; a shift in parental attitudes towards children as a result of public panics about their safety and well-being; and a drop in economic prospects. Parental anxiety about kids' futures has been especially salient, prompting many to engage in what sociologist Annette Lareau labels "concerted cultivation"—colloquially known as "helicopter parenting."

In middle- and upper-income neighborhoods it's an article of faith that children need Olympian parent involvement and relentless organized activities. Mothers and fathers now spend more time with their young than those from previous generations—playing on the floor, driving them hither and yon, and otherwise nurturing their every potential interest. With sports especially, it's unfathomable for many parents to let their children fall behind. Here's how one young mother of three put it: "If other kids are playing one sport all year, then they're going to be better than my child. If my child isn't doing it and they are, how can my child be the best or most successful at it? You feel like you're putting them at a disadvantage vs. their peers."

Also driving parental anxiety and contributing to the intensity around youth sports are the changes at colleges and universities that give athletes a distinct advantage in admissions. Recruited athletes are generally held to a softer academic standard, are afforded a streamlined admissions process, and in some cases are eligible for significant scholarship money. Given how expensive and competitive elite colleges are, on top of parents' worry that their kids must get into one, investing heavily in competitive youth sports makes a kind of sense. Now that Name, Image, and Likeness deals are available to high school athletes in 44 states and Washington, D.C., many parents feel even greater urgency to get their kids playing early and often.

Impact of These Changes

Today's commercialized youth sports environment has limited access to youth sports, widening the gap between the haves and have nots. "In modern youth sports, if you don't pay, you don't play," sports sociologist Rick Eckstein told me.

- The Aspen Institute's national survey of youth sports parents discovered that kids from the highest income homes play their main sport more regularly than their lower-income peers in town programs, schools, travel squads, and private training. Children in homes making under \$50,000 are half as likely to play travel sports as kids in households earning \$100,000 and up.
- In their research on sports clubs and private teams, scholars Chris Bjork and Chris Knoester found that "Opportunities are steadily declining for less educated families that don't have the knowledge or the money to invest in their kids' sports."
- Participation rates among children in the lowest income homes dropped from 35.5 percent in 2012 to 24.9 percent in 2024, according to the Aspen's Institute's national survey of youth sports parents. In the highest income homes, 45.1 percent of children played sports, a gap of 20.2 percentage points. Meanwhile, boys' participation has fallen off a cliff: just 41 percent took part in 2023, a drop from 50 percent in 2013.

Commercialization also has eroded the overall youth sports experience. Much of this is related to early specialization in a single sport, the defining characteristic of our youth sports system, confirming Coakley's observation that "any time the livelihood of adults depends upon kids doing certain things in sports, there is potential for abuse."

- In 2023, Aspen found that 44 percent of kids between the ages of 5 and 18 who played sports got injured. One in 20 kids who played tore a knee ligament, and one in 12 got a concussion. Half of these were the result of overuse, usually from too much training and too little rest. Pediatric sports doctor Heather Bergeson has called overuse injuries an “epidemic.” Orthopedic surgeon Charles Popkin said the same about the number of Tommy John surgeries he performs among kids.
- Research conducted by Travis Dorsch at the Families in Sport Lab at Utah State revealed that the more money parents spent on a sport, the more pressure the children felt and the less they enjoyed it. “Parents spend money to help kids flourish, but the effect is just the opposite,” Dorsch told me.
- Half of sports parents feel pressure to enroll their child in one sport for year-round play, the Aspen Institute reported. And half of this segment believe they must do so not to secure recruitment to a college team but to preserve their child’s dream of playing in high school. Even level-headed parents, then, feel compelled to join an arms race that is costly and developmentally misguided.
- Sports medicine doctor Neeru Jayanthi said injury types have advanced by four years: the injuries that used to be seen in 16-year-olds are now common for 12-year-olds. Kids from wealthier areas have higher rates of serious injury because the training volume is delivered mainly through organized practices and competitions.
- Sports medicine doctors steeped in the research on the risks of early sport specialization encourage more rest and exposure to varied activities. Even so, children between 6 and 18 played an average of 16.6 hours a week in 2022—twice the hours they played decades ago.
- According to the National ACL Injury Coalition, the rate of tears among girls has risen 32 percent over the last 15 years and in sex comparable sports, girls injure their ACLs at four times the rate of boys. Research shows that up to 50 percent of these tears will likely morph into arthritis within ten years. Female athletes also suffer from more concussions, eating disorders, and stress fractures.
- The National Athletic Trainers Association released a consensus statement in 2015 warning that “Many high school athletes have been identified as having higher incidence rates for sleep disturbances, loss of appetite, mood disturbances, short tempers, decreased interest in training and competition, decreased self-confidence, and inability to concentrate.”

Why It Matters

The high cost of play has shrunk sports participation among the poorest children, denying them the physical, emotional, and cognitive benefits that moderate physical activity provides. An avalanche of evidence reveals that age-appropriate exercise spurs good health and wellbeing.

Walking 150 minutes per week or jogging 15 minutes a day slows the buildup of the body mass index. Regular exercise improves cardiovascular health and aids brain processing. Kids who grow up engaging in sports reduce their chances of developing metabolic syndrome, which is linked to heart disease and diabetes in adulthood.

As for mental health, moderate exercise thwarts depression and relieves anxiety. Recent research showed that physical activity interventions among teenagers significantly reduced depressive symptoms compared with the control group. Recall that the surgeon general called teenage mental health “the defining public health crisis of our time,” and that the CDC’s Youth Risk Behavior survey from 2021 found that 42 percent of teenagers feel persistently sad and hopeless.

A 2025 study on the effects of afterschool sports and physical activity found startling cognitive benefits for the active cohort. Among those who moved regularly, researchers discerned improved brain processing, fewer attentional problems, and greater social awareness. This was on top of boosts in strength and flexibility and a drop in heart rates. The Aspen Institute reports that children and adolescents who are physically active test better, smoke less, ingest fewer drugs, self-regulate more effectively, and feel better about themselves.

Sports also can be especially helpful for kids who have experienced trauma. A *JAMA Pediatrics* study from 2019 found that among adults who had experienced trauma as children, playing team sports in adolescence was correlated to better mental health in adulthood. Authors of the study found that the psychological and social benefits of team sports were protective in these children’s lives, affording this vulnerable population greater self-esteem, more social acceptance, and a closer connection to school.

Playing sports locally and in schools also helps bring different or otherwise disconnected people together. It’s what social psychologist Gordon Allport labelled “doing life together.” More than lectures or mandates, playing on a team with a shared goal can dismantle barriers that divide us by class, race, and even politics.

In sum, exercise and participation on healthy sports teams with responsible coaches, and clear-eyed parents can help kids develop friendships, hone good habits, blunt the demons of anxiety and depression, and bring some glue to fractured communities. For these reasons, we should do all we can to encourage regular, moderate exercise and movement among all children and teenagers.

What Reform Should Look Like

I appreciate the interest this subcommittee has taken in youth sports. In my view, the following recommendations would improve the youth sports ecosystem. There's only so much a single family, league, or school can do to safeguard children and keep sports healthy and fun. And despite the heroic efforts of Tom Farrey at the much-quoted Aspen Institute, along with commitments by conscientious youth sports organizations to lower the intensity and to provide low-cost options, the problems show scant signs of abating. We can all celebrate the 58 percent sports participation rate and strive to get to 63 percent by 2030. But devastating injuries, especially among girls, persist. The access divide grows. And family life outside of sports shrinks.

Now, with the onset of Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) deals, we're seeing more parents hold back their 8th grade boys, and teenagers hop from one high school to another in hopes of attracting attention from powerful agents and influential college coaches. Without action, youth sports will continue to drift away from their worthy purpose—to help children grow into healthy, well-adjusted adults—towards a sweaty marketplace where commercial values reign.

My friend Dionne Koller said it best: “We’ve been hashing out these problems for decades. It’s time to think about law and policy. Not to micromanage, but to create real system change.”

Parents Need Protection

- Prohibit predatory practices carried out by all youth sport operators, like stay-to-play mandates that require parents to pay for hotel rooms at distant tournaments.
- Require truth in advertising among sports providers. That would include providing regular, accurate information to parents about the club's, team's, or sports academy's success rate in delivering kids to college teams and securing NIL deals.
- Eliminate junk fees and require transparency by directing the FTC to enact the appropriate rulemaking.

Prioritize Children's Needs

- Establish and mandate minimum safety and compliance standards for all organizations, to include Level 2 background checks, coach training in CPR, basic safety, and age-appropriate athletic development.
- Expand opportunities for children in low-income areas by offering grants and tax incentives to community programs that offer low-cost sports.
- Require all youth sports organization to register with the U.S. Center for Safe Sport. This was Tom Farrey's recommendation, and I'm seconding it here. A national registry of sports providers which would improve data collection and impose some accountability.

- Offer incentives and liability protections to those youth sports organizations that operate responsibly.

In a Perfect World

- Adopt the Children's Bill of Rights in Sports, which gives kids primary decision making in how and what they play.
- Embrace Norway's model for sports governance: enable broad and lasting participation; eliminate scorekeeping, rankings, and championship events before age 13; fund local play.
- Restore and enforce sports seasons.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before this subcommittee. It's heartening but not surprising to see bipartisan interest in this issue; sports have a way of unifying diverse groups. I implore you to confront the problems in youth sports and work together to create solutions that best serve the children who play them.