



PUBLIC SPACE *for* PUBLIC USE

A Review of Community Access to School
and Municipal Facilities in Ontario



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TORONTO**

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SPACE

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COMMUNITY SPACE EVERYWHERE

Acknowledgements

PUBLIC SPACE FOR PUBLIC USE: A REVIEW OF COMMUNITY ACCESS TO SCHOOL AND MUNICIPAL FACILITIES IN ONTARIO

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(ABOUT THE SPACE COALITION)

Working in collaboration with SPT, SPACE is a strategic outreach and action research coalition composed of diverse community organizations in Toronto and across Ontario. Its aim is to ensure that the investments made by the provincial funding of the *Community Use of Schools* program is increasing access to schools and truly benefiting the broad, diverse community in an equitable manner. The SPACE Coalition and SPT have reached out to over 300 groups across Ontario, and built a coalition of over 20 city and province-wide community-based organizations serving thousands of citizens across Toronto and Ontario.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Community access to public places, like schools and municipal facilities, provides the foundation for healthy and vibrant neighbourhoods. When groups have locally-situated meeting spots to offer programs and services the entire community thrives. These spaces become home to social clubs, recreation groups, health services, cultural centres and so much more.

Community Use of Schools Provincial Program

In 1997 the Ontario government implemented a new funding formula as a means for distributing funds to school boards. This resulted in a dramatic increase in user fees for community access to schools. To help reduce these costs, in 2004 the government introduced the *Community Use of Schools* (CUS) program funding. Following the implementation of the program, the SPACE Coalition conducted a research project which found that 32% of school space users were once again beginning to increase their use of school space (SPACE Coalition, 2007). In 2008, Ontario committed to enhancing the *Community Use of Schools* program. By 2012 CUS funding was to be increased to \$66 million and the *Priority School Initiative* (PSI), a program which eliminates permit fees in specific schools in high-needs neighbourhoods, was to be increased to 500 schools (Office of the Premier, 2008). However, CUS funding has flatlined at approximately \$48 million over the past three years and the *Priority School Initiative* is only offered in 220 schools. This research project examines the impact of this funding freeze, along with other barriers that restrict community access to public spaces.

Key Findings

The Cost of Underfunding

Lack of new investment from the provincial government means that school boards are having to raise permit fees to keep up with the rising costs of keeping doors open. **Compared to 2008/09, almost twice as many school space users (29%) from across the province reported an increase in permit fees and 28% needed to cancel or reduce programs. Unfortunately, the situation is not any better for municipal space users: about one-third reported an increase in fees.** Despite this, demand remains high. School space users reported the lack of available space, exacerbated by school closings, along with high costs, as main reasons for having to cancel or reduce programs: “If there was more space, there would be more programming.” This is reiterated by municipal space users, though only 10% reported the need to cancel or reduce programs.

Inefficient and Unfriendly Systems

Results from our survey also indicate that the challenges of accessing space are more than financial. Space users indicated that access could be improved if the approval process was faster, there was access to more facilities and the permitting process was easier. **While the majority of municipal space users have their applications approved or rejected in less than one month, only 34% of school space users have their application approved or rejected in that time frame.** Groups accessing public space to run programs or offer services need the guarantee of space to make future plans. Having a centralized permitting system (preferably with an online platform) will aid in accessing these publicly funded assets.

Importance of Local Hubs

Our provincial government and municipalities often cite the important role community hubs can play in the well-being of neighbourhoods and residents. They offer valuable services and programs in places that are accessible to the community. Although community hubs can take many forms, schools and repurposed schools are frequently referenced as the ideal location. Not only is this effective use of these publicly-owned, centrally-located assets, it also makes the school even more relevant to the community.

Highlighted Recommendations

To address these and other concerns, this report outlines many recommendations for governing bodies at the provincial, municipal and school board level on how to encourage fair and equitable access to community space and develop community hubs. We recommend:

- the Province deliver on the \$66 million investment promised for community use, with a yearly inflationary increase, and as part of this investment expand the current number of Priority Schools from 220 to 500 as promised at the initial announcement of the *Priority Schools Initiative* (Office of the Premier, 2008);
- that municipalities and local school boards work together to align their policies and processes to improve the customer service experience for the user. This should include consistency with regard to:
 - online application software;
 - priority ranking for underserved groups;
 - streamlining the renewal process for recurring users;
 - creating a centralized, accessible website with a shared schedule and booking function that is coordinated between a number of space providing agencies and institutions; and
 - ensuring that rules and regulations are readily available, easily understood and involve users in their creation (including youth, seniors and newcomers);
- that the Province, municipalities and school boards continue expanding access to free spaces and programs.

The evidence is clear that access to public spaces strengthens communities, but concerted effort from all levels of government is required to open-up public space for public use. Further investment needs to be made to develop community hubs and keep school doors open beyond 3:30. This investment is not only cost effective in terms of supporting health, but allows for the development of strong, sustainable programs and services that support our communities. This results in vibrant neighbourhoods where people are engaged, safe and happy.

(INTRODUCTION)

Where we live and what opportunities are available in our community impacts how we identify with and experience the world around us. Healthy and vibrant neighbourhoods foster a sense of belonging and safety, and promote overall positive physical and mental health among residents. When welcoming places exist and opportunities are provided in neighbourhoods that encourage people to come together, we witness the creation of ideas, the building of trust, and the development of resilience.

Publicly funded assets, such as schools and municipal facilities, are important places where people can gather together and build stronger neighbourhoods. Imagine these spaces: diverse groups sharing stories about their cultures; children learning to cook while developing their math skills; and parents uniting to improve the quality of life for their children and the community. However, these and other groups often encounter barriers that prevent or deter them from accessing these publicly-owned facilities. Such barriers include, but are not limited to:

- high costs associated with permitting space,
- complicated permit processes,
- long wait times and/or last minute notices for approval/rejection of a permit application,
- information about spaces available and the permit process is not easily accessible, and
- no suitable space is available.

Community Use of Schools and Related Programs

In 2004, the Government of Ontario took a significant step in recognizing the important role schools play in their communities by providing school boards with funding through *Community Use of Schools* (CUS) and related programs (Office of the Premier, 2005). This investment has allowed school boards to open schools up for their communities and make space more affordable outside of school hours (Ministry of Education, 2011b). The CUS program is based on principles that emphasize the provision of affordable, fair and equitable access to schools (see Appendix A for the complete listing of CUS program principles).

Since its implementation, the CUS program has evolved to address emerging issues and barriers related to accessing space outside of school operating hours. The *Operational Component*, meant to help school boards with the costs of heating, lighting and cleaning required to keep schools open, is complemented by three other streams of funding:

- *Focus on Youth* – This program allows schools to open free of charge during the summer months so non-profit community agencies can run summer programs for children while simultaneously supporting youth employment opportunities (in Toronto, Hamilton, Ottawa and Windsor).
- *Community Outreach Coordinators* – Funding provides for staff positions designated to support the success of the CUS programs.

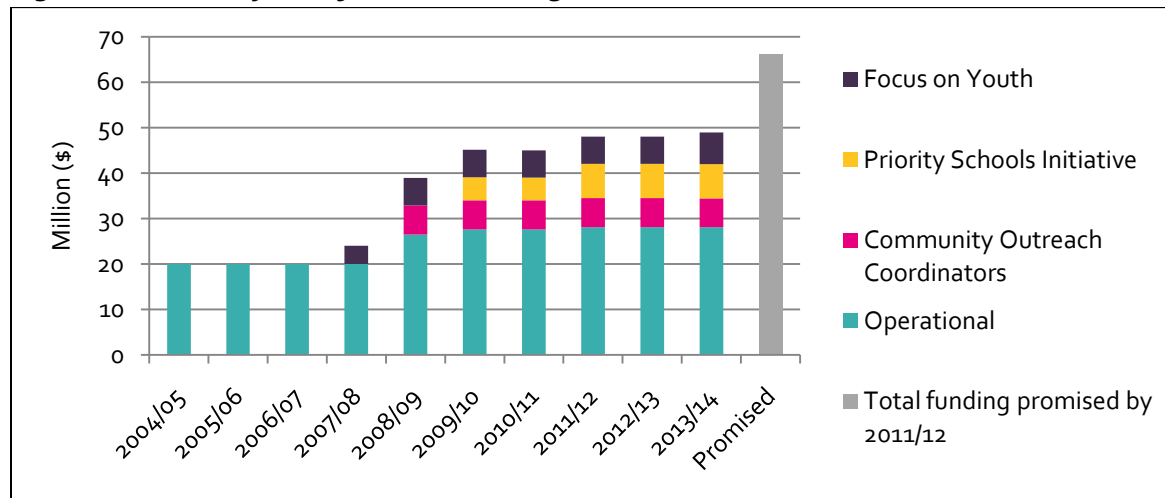
"Schools should belong to the community after 4pm and be governed by the community."

–Community Space Advocate,
Toronto

- *Priority School Initiative* – This program allows 220 schools in high-needs neighbourhoods throughout Ontario to offer space free of charge.

In 2008, Ontario committed to enhancing the *Community Use of Schools* program. By 2012 CUS funding was to be increased to \$66 million and the *Priority School Initiative* was to be increased to 500 schools (Office of the Premier, 2008). However, CUS funding has flatlined at approximately \$48 million over the past three years and the *Priority School Initiative* is only offered in 220 schools (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Community Use of Schools Funding



Sources: Ministry of Education, 2013a; Ministry of Education, 2013b; Ministry of Education, 2012a; Ministry of Education, 2012b; Ministry of Education, 2011a; Ministry of Education, 2011c; Ministry of Education, 2010a; Ministry of Education, 2010b; Ministry of Education, 2009a; Ministry of Education, 2009b; Ministry of Education, 2008b; Ministry of Education, 2008c; Ministry of Education, 2008d; Office of the Premier, 2008.

Community Hubs

A community hub is a conveniently located space that is recognized and valued by local residents. It is a gathering spot for people to join activities and access programs and services (Graves, 2011). It can be very specific, like a library, or more general, like a multiservice centre, offering:

- primary care,
- employment or settlement supports,
- cultural and recreation facilities,
- child care,
- parenting and family literacy centres,
- mental health and addiction programming, and/or
- support services for seniors and persons with disabilities.

Research has found that community hubs offer improved program coordination through service collaboration, cross-referrals and sharing resources (Dyson, 2011). To maintain affordability, accessibility and the long-term viability of hubs, government funding is required. As suburban and rural neighbourhoods are often challenged by a lack of local services, community hubs are growing in popularity as a way to provide a “one-stop shop” to address local needs. Municipalities, community

organizations and funders are taking innovative approaches to developing community hubs. For example, this year the Town of Georgina announced a commitment of up to \$990,000 for the revitalization and transformation of a former school into the Georgina Creative Community Hub (Town of Georgina, 2013). The project will also draw on federal funding from the *Community Infrastructure Improvement Fund*.

SPOTLIGHT ON SPACE

The Family Centre – Community Hub

Truly “Better together”

The Family Centre (FC), located in Kitchener, Ontario has found a creative way to address space requirements for small and start-up non-profit organizations through their FC Community Hub initiative. Their policy: no organization will be turned away for financial reasons.

Shared Space

The Community Hub offers workstations for small and start-up organizations in an open-concept space. Renters get a desk, telephone with extension, internet, mailing address, and shared reception at the Family Centre. Plus the open-concept space means groups can learn from each other and work together.



Mentorship

Capacity Waterloo Region, a Community Hub project partner, provides non-profits with new resources and professional support. The Executive Director meets with hub organizations once a month and offers mentorship on topics such as board governance, finance and *Imagine Canada* accreditation.

The Family Centre also offers workshops, open to any small non-profit, on topics identified by the organizations, including event fundraising, social media, strategic planning and book keeping.

Shared Resources

The Family Centre has been able to purchase a projector, video camera, and laptop that are shared among the organizations. Without the support of the Community Hub these small organizations may not have access to such expensive equipment. Member organizations are also exploring other shared resources such as a modern database system to track and engage donors and supporters.

Financial Subsidies

As members of the Community Hub, groups have access to other facilities at the Family Centre. This ranges from small, closed-door meeting rooms to an auditorium, the cost of which can be subsidized by the Community Hub program as necessary.

For more information email coordinator@thefamilycentre.ca

or visit www.thefamilycentre.ca/communityhub.html

(C. Dearlove, personal communication, October 2, 2013)

(WHAT WE DID)

The SPACE Coalition is a group of individuals and organizations from across Ontario committed to improving access to public space. Since 2005, the SPACE Coalition, in collaboration with Social Planning Toronto, has conducted bi-annual evaluations of the provincial CUS program, policy and funding. In 2009 the scope of the SPACE Coalition expanded to also address issues related to municipal facilities and has subsequently been monitoring access to them with our survey. Through our research and community consultations we have identified space-related issues pertaining to equity, access and affordability. These issues must be addressed in order to maximize community use of our publicly funded assets.

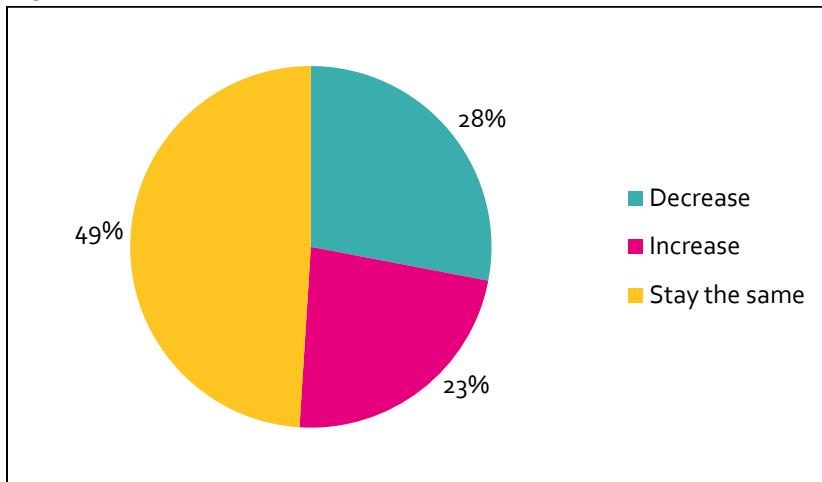
This report summarizes what we heard from a broad range of permit holders from across Ontario and, where notable, changes since our 2009 survey. We have also included findings from a short survey completed by Community Outreach Coordinators from across Ontario, as well as our recommendations for action. (See Appendix B for more about our survey distribution and analysis.)

(WHAT WE HEARD)

Changes in the Use of School Space

There is a mix of experiences for school space users: while 62% of school space users are holding on to or increasing their space use, 28% are decreasing their use. This is a similar pattern to what we saw in 2008/09.

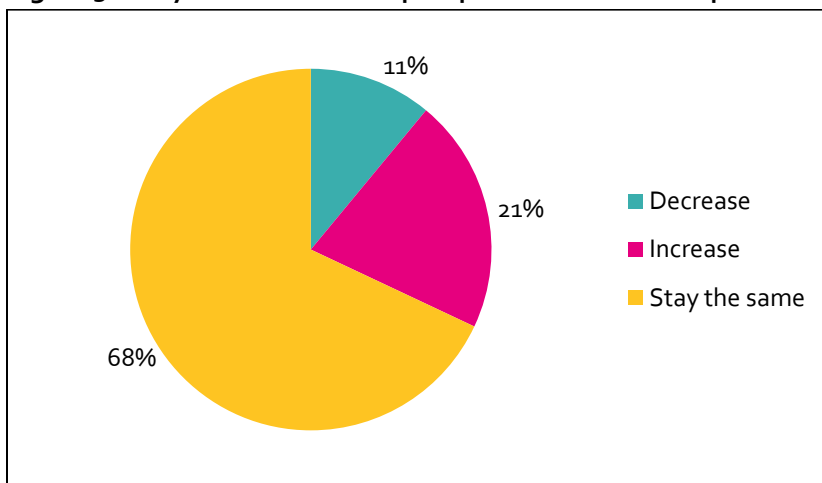
Figure 2. Did your use of school space in 2011/12 compared to 2010/11?



Changes in the Use of Municipal Space

For municipal space users, 89% are maintaining or increasing their use of space. Eleven percent are decreasing their use of municipal space. It is difficult to comment on the reasons for these changes as municipalities vary greatly in terms of quantity and type of public space, financing and organizational structure. This may also reflect changes in users' needs.

Figure 3. Did your use of municipal space in 2011/12 compared to 2010/11?



Changes in School Permit Fees

We asked respondents if their school permit fees for 2011/12 increased, decreased or stayed the same relative to the previous year. **Compared to 2008/09, almost twice as many respondents reported their permit fees were increasing.** The flatlining of CUS funding and increasing costs associated with keeping buildings open have made the use of schools outside of regular hours more expensive.

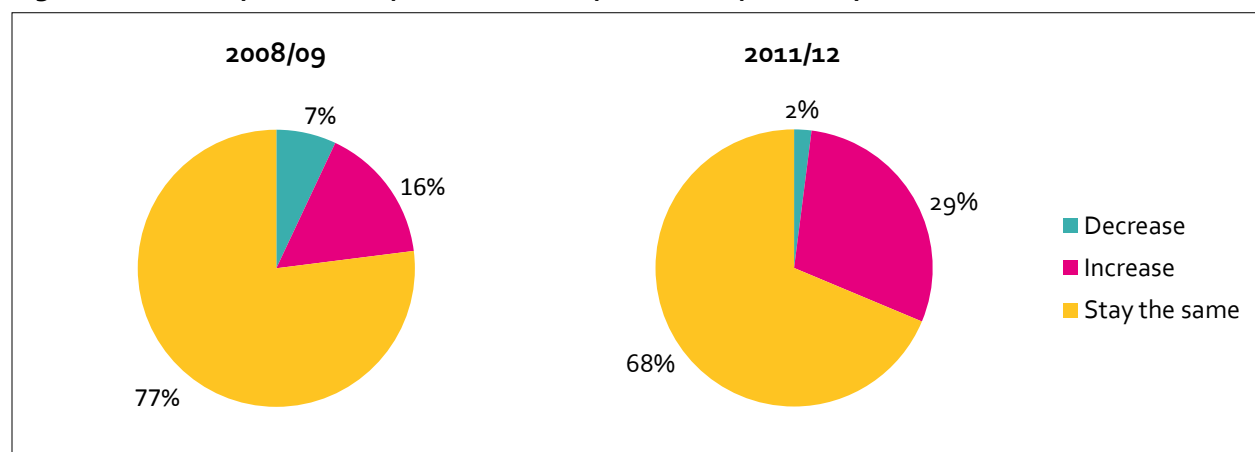
Sixty-six percent of respondents have also said there are circumstances under which school space can be permitted for free. Free school space was made possible as a result of the CUS program, *Focus on Youth* and the *Priority School Initiative*, with a few respondents referencing principal's consent. Despite this, the space needs of our respondents were not met. This may be a result of:

- Geography – CUS, FOY or PSI subsidized schools are not accessible due to their location.
- Principal's consent – The space user is unable to get the required consent from the school principal to access the space.
- Insufficient available space – High demand for space means that the subsidized space is fully booked by other groups.
- Space is available free of cost only at certain times and on certain days not suitable for program delivery (i.e. Monday to Friday 3:00 pm to 6:00 pm).

"There was a dramatic decrease in the community use of schools when there was a policy change in our local school boards to charge for community use of schools (prior to that there was a reciprocal agreement between the municipalities and school boards for free use of space for children's and youth programs). Now, even with the funds available to subsidize space use, few people know about it and it is difficult to get information about how to access the subsidy."

–Trudy Beaulne, Executive Director, Social Planning Council Kitchener-Waterloo

Figure 4. How did your school permit fees compare to the previous year?



Figures do not total 100% as a result of rounding values to the closest whole number

"When the local district school board started applying an auditorium rate (approximately \$200/hour) rather than the stage rate (approximately \$50/hour) for rehearsals, it had a targeted effect on arts groups. Luckily, the school where my 60-member orchestra group rehearses has a strong focus on music and we can permit the music classroom instead. However, this is not an option for drama groups or music groups in other neighbourhoods."

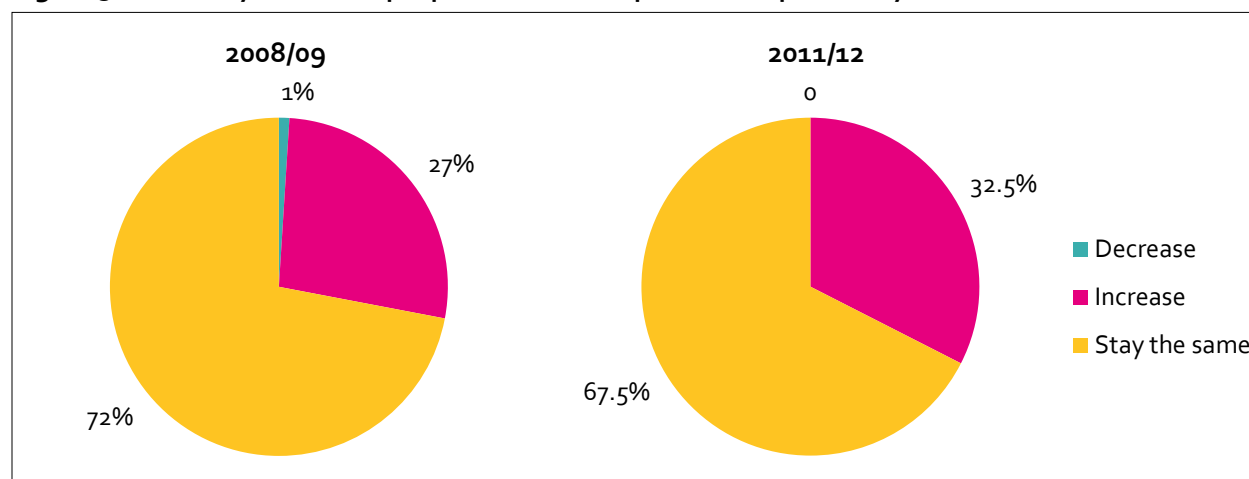
–Judy Gargaro, Manager, Etobicoke Philharmonic Orchestra

Changes in Municipal Permit Fees

Permit fees are also increasing across municipalities, with 32.5% reporting an increase between 2010/11 and 2011/12 compared to 27% between 2007/08 and 2008/09. Fifty-two percent of respondents said there are circumstances under which you can permit municipal space for free, citing councillor sponsorship, being non-profit, and not charging fees to participants, among other more specific case-related circumstances.

It is important to note that permit fees can vary substantially between rural and urban areas, the former often providing space free of charge.

Figure 5. How did your municipal permit fees compare to the previous year?



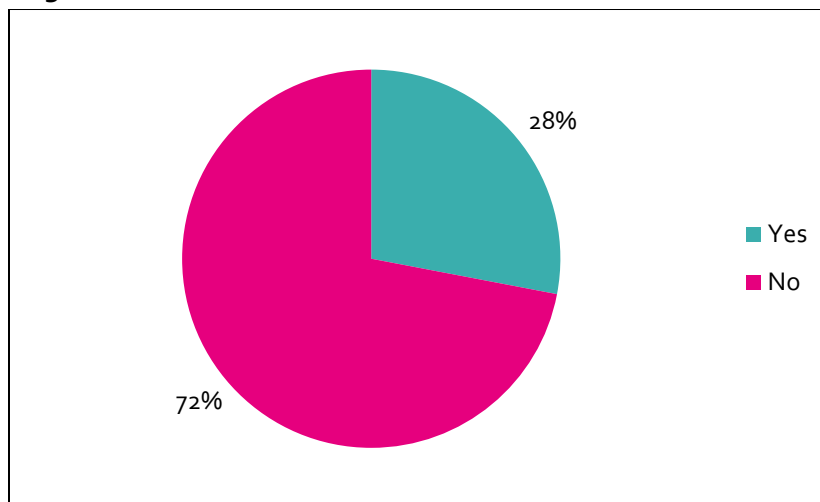
Cancelled or Reduced Programs in Schools

Twenty-eight percent of respondents indicated they had to cancel or reduce their school-based programs, citing lack of volunteers, high costs of permits and the lack of space as the main reasons. Participants said that as Full-Day Kindergarten continues to roll out and as under-enrolled schools are closed there is a shortage of available school space.

"We had the space for our March Break Day Camp booked at a public school and it was pulled from us one month before the beginning of camp. In this instance a new space was found but after we fully registered kids into the camp, only two weeks before the start date, we were told it was no longer available. This kind of thing happens all the time and we are vulnerable because we have very little funding and no program space of our own."

–Community Space User, Southern Ontario

Figure 6. Did you have to cancel or reduce your school based programs for September 2011 - August 2012?



Nineteen percent of respondents also cited school closing as having impacted their ability to use school space. This presents a challenge to community groups who then need to find suitable space (from a reduced inventory) in the same neighbourhood. Six percent of respondents also indicated their school board was discussing selling off green space. This can be particularly detrimental to programs requiring outdoor space and the larger community in general where the schoolyard is treated as a park for families outside of school hours.

"Students are no longer in the area; they are bused to various schools, so they cannot attend the program in their neighbourhood. [This has] reduced our participation numbers."

–Community Space User, Peterborough

SPOTLIGHT ON SPACE

Erin Hoops – Main Place Youth Centre

Vacant school fills a hole in a community

In operation for more than 10 years, Erin Hoops - Main Place Youth Centre, located in Erin, Ontario, is a place for youth and adults alike to enjoy creative play – free of charge!

Erin Hoops began its programming in a public school but after fees began to rise in 2000 and were eventually unmanageable, the organization (funded solely by donations) moved locations. They now rent the gym and two classrooms in a privately-owned vacant school, which they can enjoy around the clock.



Erin Hoops allows children to learn and develop skills in areas that are interesting to them, including:

- arts and crafts,
- archery,
- baseball,
- skateboarding,
- badminton,
- laser tag,
- fort building,
- drama,
- floor hockey,
- digital photography,
- video and film production,
- unicycling and bicycling, and
- dance.



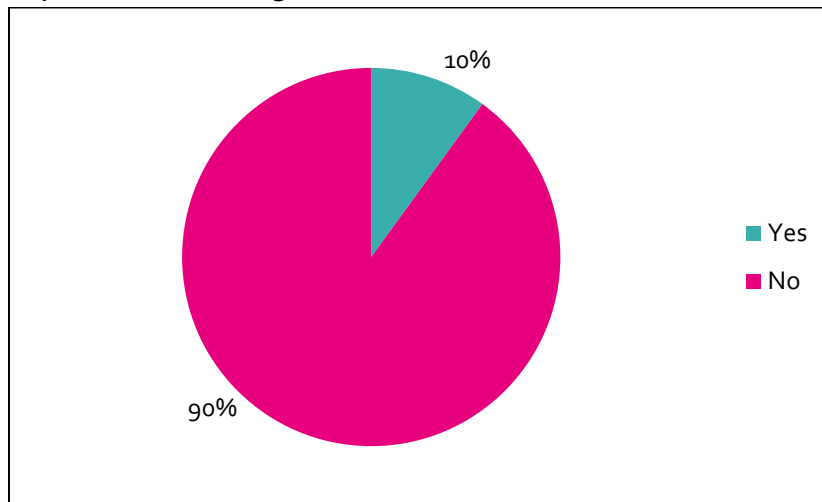
For more information, visit www.erinhoops.ca.

(P. Suessmuth, personal communication, Oct. 28, 2013)

Cancelled or Reduced Programs in Municipal Spaces

Only 10% of municipal space users indicated they had to cancel or reduce programs. Very few respondents (11%) indicated that the closing of a municipal space impacted their use of municipal space, with only 4% using schools as an alternative.

Figure 7. Did you have to cancel or reduce your programs carried out in municipal space for September 2011 - August 2012?



"Parks and Recreation has a reciprocal partnership with the schools. This partnership facilitates the community use of schools. Youth are provided with free access to community centres and Parks and Recreation is able to use school space for some of their programs. It's a partnership that works very well in our community."

–Community Space User, Renfrew County

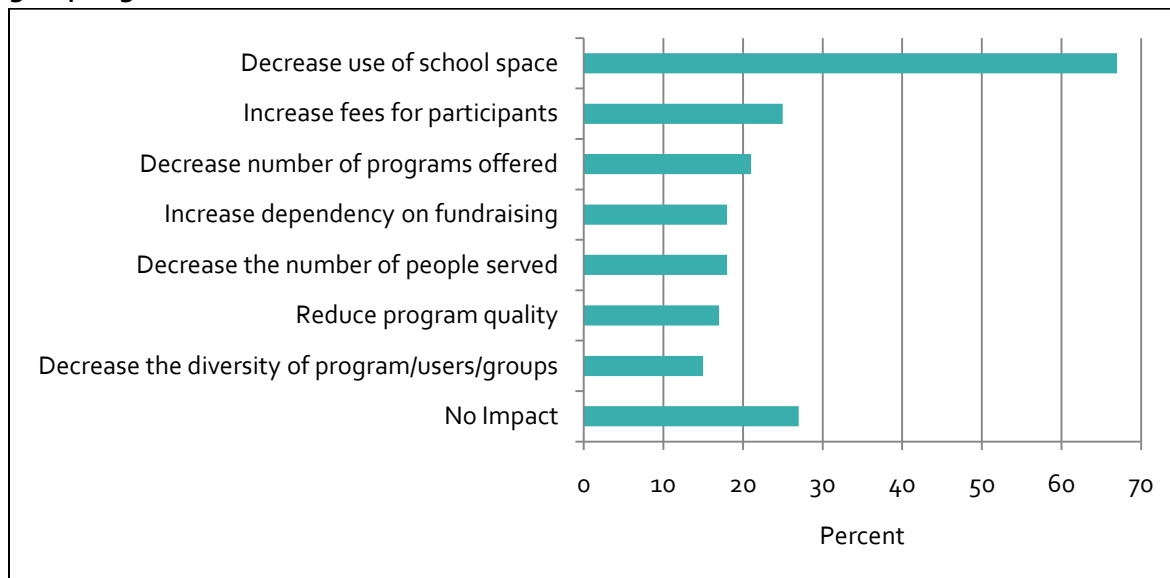
"Trying to find inclusive and accessible program space to permit is a challenge. We have many older buildings owned and run by small organizations that do not have the funding to renovate to the current accessibility standards. As well, many of the older buildings have been "grandfathered in" and are not required to undergo the accessibility retrofit. An additional barrier is inadequate accessible public transportation for people to travel to our programs."

–Community Space User, Cambridge

Changes in Permit Fees and Programming Impacts

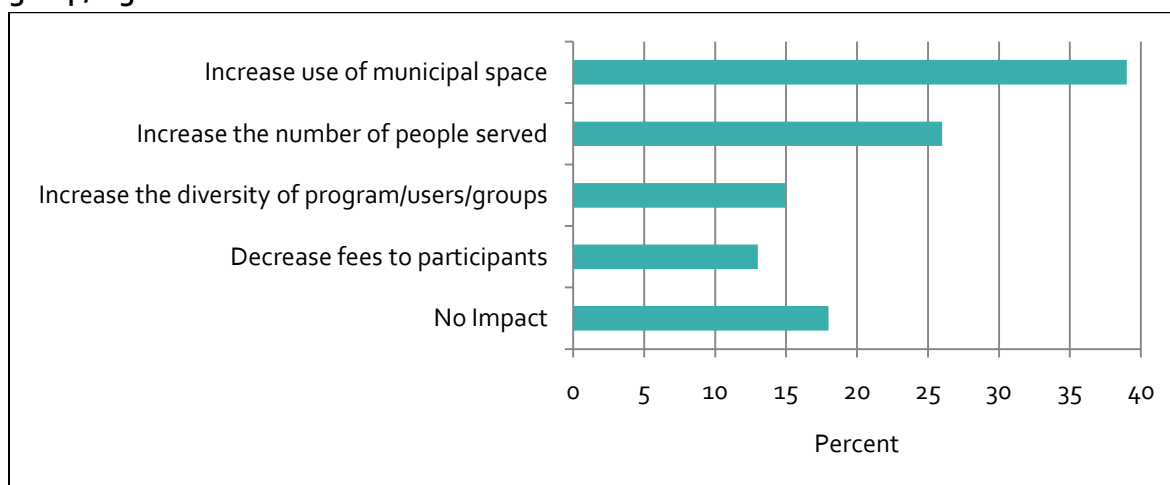
Many school boards have already or will soon be introducing increases to their permit fees, as has been the case since CUS funding was flatlined in 2011. We asked school space users how this would impact their group or organization. The most commonly cited impact was decreased use of school space. Others cited increased fees for participants and decreased numbers of programs offered.

Figure 8. If your school board were to increase permit fees how would this impact your group/organization?



Alternatively, we asked municipal space users how they would be impacted if their permit fees were decreased. **Almost 40% of respondents indicated they would increase their use of municipal spaces.** Others indicated they would increase the diversity or number of people served.

Figure 9. If your municipality were to decrease permit fees how would this impact your group/organization?



The Permit Process

We asked both municipal and school space users how long it takes for their permit to be processed from the point at which they submit their application until they receive a response. We found that overall municipal permits are processed much more quickly. Complicated permit processes and long wait times can stifle innovation and creativity; they can occupy significant amounts of time and energy that could be instead directed toward developing unique programs that benefit the community.

"We have been waiting a long time for the approval of space in the school. As a result, we have been delayed in starting our programs and this affects the community and participants."

–Community Space User, Toronto

Figure 10. What is the average time it takes from submission of your school permit application to the response that your application has been approved or rejected?

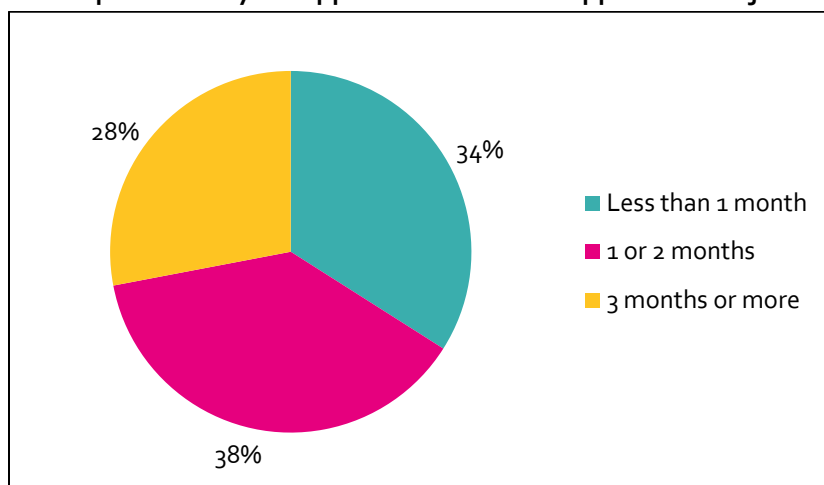
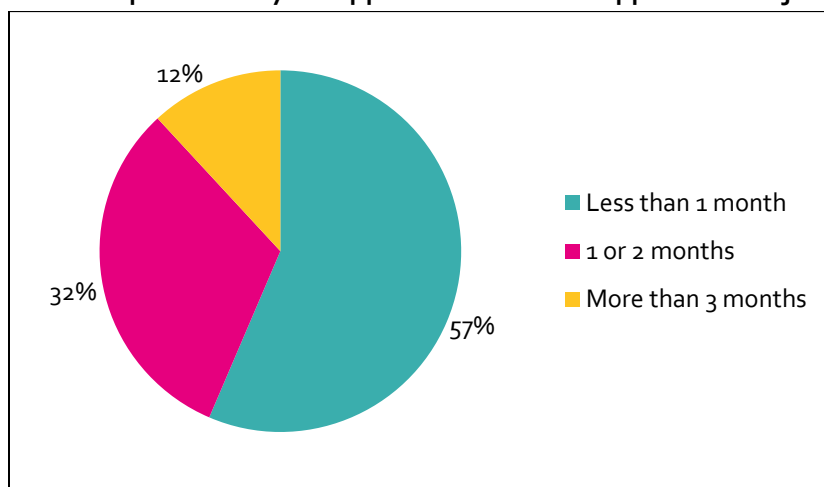


Figure 11. What is the average time it takes from submission of your municipal permit application to the response that your application has been approved or rejected?



Figures do not total 100% as a result of rounding values to the closest whole number

The majority of both school and municipal space users reported that their permit application process was easy to understand and that permit staff were easy to contact. However, 37% of municipal space users reported not being able to easily access information on the location and types of spaces available; respondents suggested a centralized system rather than having to contact each individual facility.

"All in all it has been a great experience. Process is easy, staff is fantastic."

–Community Space User,
Brampton

Improving Access to Space

There are a number of ways both school and municipal space providers can improve access to space. Fifty percent of respondents want a faster school permit application process. Lower permit fees, access to more facilities, and a simpler permit process should also be pursued by both school boards and municipalities. More specifically, respondents indicated that they would prefer an online application process. This has already been partially or fully implemented by some school boards and municipalities across Ontario. However, it is extremely important that an alternative be available for those that do not have access to a computer and the internet.

"If there was more access to school space, there would be more programming."

–Community Space User,
Ottawa

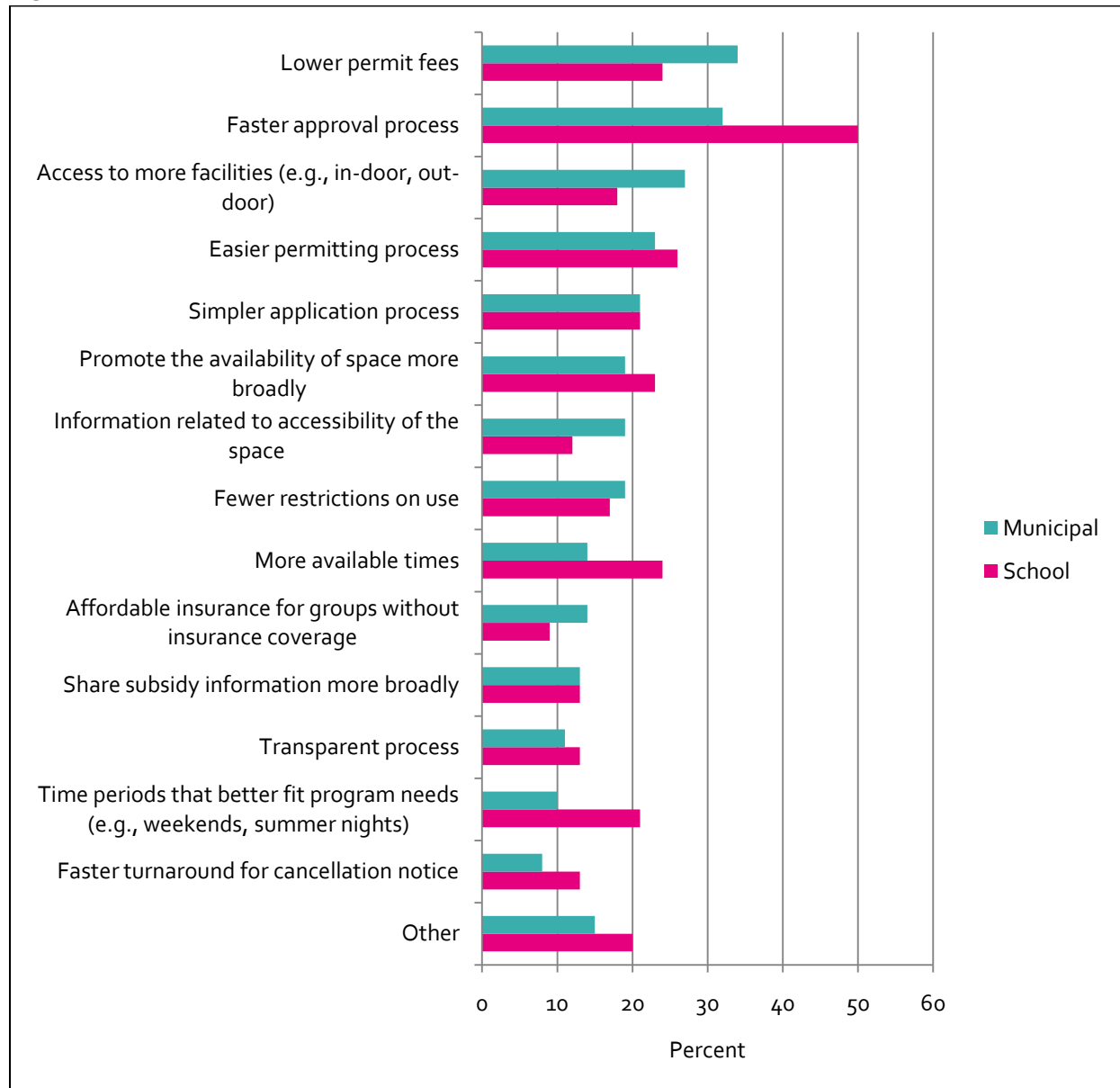
"We had to cancel the program we wanted to run because we did not get space in any of the schools we applied for."

–Community Space User,
Ottawa

"It took me probably 30 to 40 hours to get all of the necessary things collected and bought (insurance, etc.) for the permit. This is fine for me, but many organizations simply don't have the time to do this. It really should be a much much shorter process (the permit was for use of a park). There really is no reason this couldn't all be consolidated and take around 2-3 hours to get done."

–Community Space User, Toronto

Figure 12. How could access to space be improved?



The Role of the Community Outreach Coordinator (COC)

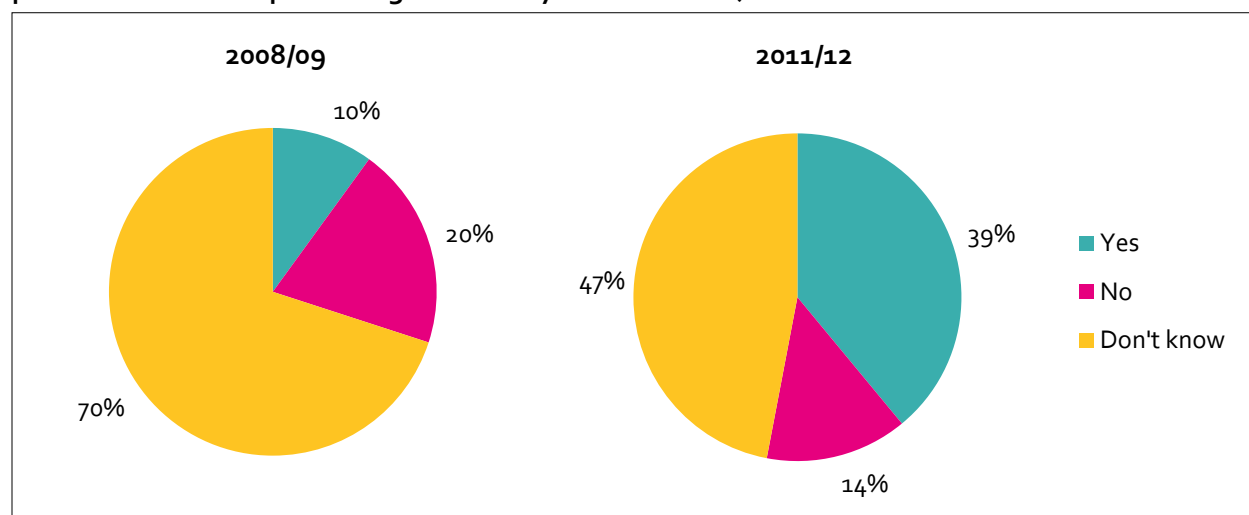
Every school board designates at least a 0.5 full-time equivalent staff position for a Community Outreach Coordinator dedicated to overseeing the *Community Use of Schools* program. We asked school space users if their school board has a Community Outreach Coordinator-type position. Thirty-nine percent indicated that their school board did employ such a position, while 61%* did not know the position exists. This is a significant

"The Community Use of Schools Officer generally helps us work things out– within her own ability. We love her!"

–Community Space User, Cambridge

improvement from our 2009 survey responses. Since the initiative was implemented in 2008/09, the COCs have developed relationships with community members and space users. Though more work should be done in promoting the position, they are becoming better-known as a guide and asset for accessing school space.

Figure 13. Does your school board have a Community Outreach Coordinator-type position (a person dedicated to promoting community use of schools)?



Community Outreach Coordinators' Survey

The COC position is an important resource for ensuring the success of *Community Use of Schools* program. For the first time the SPACE Coalition distributed a short survey to these specialized staff persons in hopes of learning from their breadth of knowledge. We look forward to building on this work in the future.

* Since we confirmed all school boards have a COC-type position, we can conclude all respondents who answered "no" do not know the position exists.

Community Outreach Coordinators from all 72 school boards were asked about community use practices in their region. Twelve responses were received.

- All respondents stated that there are conditions under which schools can be accessed for free, with most referring to the *Priorities Schools Initiative*, principal consent, and specific eligibility under certain *Community Use of Schools* categories.
- The majority of respondents stated that the permit office had to approve permits, with about half reporting that school principals also had to approve the application.
- About half reported that their school board has set application deadlines for fall/winter and summer use permits.

Community Use of Schools Advisory Committees

The SPACE Coalition has long promoted the *Community Use of Schools Advisory Committee* as a promising practice for school boards. Currently only one out of the 72 school boards report having a Community Use of Schools Advisory Committee (CUSAC), the Toronto District School Board. Advisory committees exist at the school board level to consider and make recommendations on a variety of matters. These committees are comprised of passionate educators, trustees, parents, community members and representatives from local organizations who have a vested interest in education and community access to local schools, and are experts on the topic area.

A Community Use of Schools Advisory Committee offers a platform for individuals to have their voice heard, connect with other concerned community members and impact the roles schools play in their communities. The SPACE Coalition commends the Toronto District School Board for creating this advisory committee and continues to recommend that all school boards to develop their own.

(CONCLUSIONS)

The Province of Ontario and Ontario municipalities have recognized the importance of community access to space as foundational to the building of strong neighbourhoods and as a contributing factor to residents' well-being. Community groups offer important services to residents, such as settlement services for newcomers and homework help for students. When school boards and municipalities provide such groups with equitably accessible meeting space within their communities, they are contributing to the development of positive, healthy neighbourhoods.

The *Community Use of Schools*, *Priority School Initiative* and *Focus on Youth* programs have helped to eliminate financial barriers to accessing space under certain circumstances; however, not all groups have access to these supports. Additionally, the flatlining of these investments for the last three years and an actual decrease in *Priority School Initiative* and Community Outreach Coordinator funds for the 2013/14 year means that, with inflation, every year these groups make do with less. Continued investment needs to be made, as promised by the government, to open-up public space for public use. Instead, as community-serving agencies and grassroots organizations face increasing demand for services, they have reduced capacity with which to offer their services.

The impact of the austerity agenda in Ontario and across the country is being felt at all levels. Underinvestment is destabilizing the system. Service providers not only find the cost of space rising, but also are receiving less funding for programming. Consequently, they find themselves increasingly seeking cost saving mechanisms and are more reliant on volunteers to run programs, as was echoed in our survey. Of additional concern is that our respondents reported struggling to find volunteer support. As underfunding continues and need grows, volunteers find increasing demands on their time and burnout ensues; a dependence on volunteers is not a sustainable solution.

A further challenge to accessing space, and another product of funding shortfalls, is school boards that are selling under-utilized schools to balance operating budgets and severing school lands to pay for capital repairs. In June 2013, Trustees at the Toronto District School Board approved the sale of six school sites and the severing of six playgrounds (Rushowy, 2013). Across Ontario, 125 schools are slated or recommended to close between 2012 and 2015 (People for Education, 2012). While declining enrolment and aging infrastructure are important considerations, the sale of schools, the heart of the community, must be understood as more than a short term means of balancing a budget. As communities continue to grow and land prices rise, replacing lost real estate in the future may be impossible, or at least extremely expensive. The loss of local community space

"What defines a character of a city is its public space, not its private space. What defines the value of the private assets of the space are not the assets by themselves but the common assets. The value of the public good affects the value of the private good. We need to show every day that public spaces are an asset to a city."

–UN-HABITAT Executive
Director Joan Clos i Matheu
(Project for Public Spaces, Inc.,
2012).

for program and service delivery cannot be underestimated. School and municipal planning need to ensure that opportunities for public space remain a priority.

Ontario has recognized the important role community hubs can play in ensuring the well-being of individuals and communities. When the Ministry of Children and Youth released its *Review of the Roots of Youth Violence*, it once again recommended that the Province invest in community hubs and full access to schools for community use and services in identified neighbourhoods (Ministry of Children and Youth Services, 2011). Furthermore, Ontario's *Poverty Reduction Strategy* highlights the importance of community hubs, identifying schools as the best location for them (Government of Ontario, 2013).

Concerted effort from all levels of government is required to open public space for public use. Further investment needs to be made to develop community hubs and open school doors beyond 3:30. This investment is not only cost effective in terms of supporting health, but allows for the development of strong, sustainable programs and services that support our communities. What results are vibrant neighbourhoods where people are engaged, safe and happy.

"As a not-for-profit organization providing youth programs across Ontario, we could not serve as many children in as many facilities as we do without permits being subsidized."

—Girl Guides of Canada - Ontario Council

SPOTLIGHT ON SPACE

Toronto District School Board – *Model Schools for Inner Cities*

Service integration to meet students' needs

Model Schools for Inner Cities is a unique, award-winning program that strives to give students in inner city schools equitable opportunities to thrive. Recognizing that students' educational opportunities are influenced by where they live and what resources are available, the TDSB has changed the way schools in high poverty neighbourhoods operate.

Beyond 3:30*

Beyond 3:30 is an after-school program for students in Grades 6, 7 and 8. The program runs Monday to Friday in local schools. Participants engage in fun activities tailored to the needs of the neighbourhood while developing their social skills and improving their self-esteem.

Integrated Service Delivery*

Model Schools offer programs and services that are not easily accessible in the community, including:

- nutrition programs,
- vision and hearing testing,
- paediatric clinics,
- telepsychiatry clinics, and/or
- resiliency initiatives.

Through these initiatives and partnerships with local organizations, and with a focus on parent involvement, Model Schools are hubs in their communities.

For more information, visit www.tdsb.on.ca/Community/ModelSchoolsforInnerCities.

(Rushowy, 2010; Toronto District School Board, n.d.)



* Availability of program or service may vary by school

[RECOMMENDATIONS]

Provincial Level

Long Term Legislative Changes

1. 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.

Regulatory Changes

2. Expand the current work underway in various provincial ministries to further implement and regulate policies and processes that support the creation of community hubs, through cross-sectoral collaboration, the re-purposing of public space, and the coordination of funding.

Changes with a Financial Impact

3. Deliver on the \$66 million investment promised for community use, with a yearly inflationary increase, and as part of this investment expand the current number of Priority Schools from 220 to 500 as promised at the initial announcement of the *Priority Schools Initiative* (Office of the Premier, 2008).
4. Expand the authority of the Provincial Ombudsman to the oversight of the *Community Use of Schools* program. Ombudsmen are impartial investigators of residents' complaints about the administration of government. The Office is a place of last resort, with free and confidential services to ensure the fair and equitable provision of services to all of Ontario's residents (to be considered in conjunction with Recommendation 8).

School Board Level

Regulatory Changes

5. Improve the permit application process so it is more straightforward, user-friendly, transparent, accessible and accountable by:
 - adopting appropriate policies and practices to move towards more consistency in the permit application process and import promising practices;
 - ensuring that principals and caretakers cannot arbitrarily block access to user groups;
 - tracking permit refusals;
 - giving priority to neighbourhood space users in the application process;
 - implementing accessible and effective dispute resolution processes at both the local board and at the provincial level to ensure the *Community Use of Schools* policy is upheld and that barriers to access are addressed;
 - designing methods to better inform potential permit groups about general space availability and which schools fall under the *Priority Schools Initiative*;

- designing methods to better inform potential permit groups about *Focus on Youth* funding, where applicable;
 - increasing outreach to improve awareness about how to permit schools; and
 - developing access and equity policies and procedures to balance the needs of existing long-term groups using school space with new and emerging community groups, particularly those working with traditionally underserved communities.
6. Create or open-up more spaces to increase opportunities and reduce over-crowding during peak times.
 7. Expand the current work underway and create cohesive policies and processes that support the creation of community hubs, through cross sectoral collaboration, the re-purposing of public space, and the coordination of funding, with an emphasis on a continuum of care and support for residents.

Changes with a Financial Impact

8. Create an Ombuds Office for each school board, whose authority includes the oversight of the *Community Use of Schools* program. Ombudsmen are impartial investigators of residents' complaints about the administration of government. The Office is a place of last resort, with free and confidential services to ensure the fair and equitable provision of services to all residents (to be considered in conjunction with Recommendation 4).

Provincial and School Board Level

Regulatory Changes

9. The Province and School Boards work with community stakeholders to actively improve accountability in the following ways:
 - school boards should table an annual report at Queen's Park demonstrating how *Community Use of Schools* and related funds were used to improve public access to schools;
 - stakeholder representatives, such as the SPACE Coalition, should be consulted in the development of indicators to be measured for the annual report, such as:
 - who used/was refused access to space,
 - reasons for refusal of access,
 - program outreach description,
 - fee structures, and
 - gaps between needs and access to service;
 - establish Community Use of School Advisory Committees in the school boards that do not already have such a committee, with representatives from youth, senior and newcomer groups;
 - increase awareness of the existence of Community Outreach Coordinators and the role they play in enabling groups to access space; and

- establish a Ministry of Education Community Use of Schools Advisory Committee to provide advice and recommendations on *Community Use of Schools* funding and utilization, and on issues such as permitting processes, space allocation decision making and classifying permit groups. Membership should include representation from youth, senior and newcomer groups.

Municipal Level

Regulatory Changes

10. Work with community stakeholders to improve access to municipal public space by:
 - creating a work group that includes community stakeholders to evaluate municipal policies to ensure more affordable and equitable access to spaces for community use and to ensure policies meet community need. Membership should include representation from youth, senior and newcomer groups;
 - improving accountability by strengthening the evaluation process;
 - giving priority to neighbourhood space users in the application process;
 - tabling an annual report to each City/Town Council demonstrating how public dollars were used to improve public access to municipal space; and
 - involving stakeholder representative organizations such as the SPACE Coalition, in the development of indicators to be measured for the annual report, such as:
 - who used/was refused access to space,
 - reasons for refusal of access,
 - program outreach description,
 - fee structures, and
 - gaps between needs and access to service.
11. Keep service provision not-for-profit.
12. Encourage and facilitate organizations to trustee grants for youth-led organizations.

Changes with a Financial Impact

13. Continue expansion of free spaces and programs.
14. Provide designated, staffed youth drop-in space every evening in every community centre.
15. Increase hospitality in non-programming spaces - i.e. permit lobby, phone and bathrooms use; provide places to sit; hire welcoming, front desk referral staff during open hours for all community centres.
16. Extend community centre hours.

17. Reduce permit costs.
18. Create fiscal policies to reduce cost barriers and increase access to space, such as the Ministry of Education's *Priority School Initiative*.
19. Expand City/Town-run before and after school programming.
20. Continue to expand arts and recreation funding and partnerships.

Provincial and Municipal Level

21. The Ontario government and municipalities should examine reciprocal agreements between school boards and municipal governments regarding community use of facilities to harmonize them with *Community Use of Schools* policies and ensure they uphold the principles of affordable and equitable community access to space for community benefit.

Municipal and School Board Level

22. Municipalities and local School Boards should work together to align their policies and processes to improve the customer service experience for the user. This should include consistency with regard to:
 - online application software;
 - priority ranking for underserved groups;
 - streamlining the renewal process for recurring users;
 - creating a centralized, accessible website with a shared schedule and booking function that is coordinated between a number of space providing agencies and institutions; and
 - ensuring that rules and regulations are readily and equitably available, easily understood and involve users in their creation (including youth, seniors and newcomers).
23. Expand the current work underway to create cohesive policies and processes that support the creation of community hubs, through cross-sectoral collaboration, the re-purposing of public space, and the coordination of funding.

(ROLE OF THE SPACE COALITION)

The SPACE (Saving Public Access to Community space Everywhere) Coalition is a strategic outreach and action research coalition, composed of diverse community organizations and networks from across Ontario committed to improving access to public space. Social Planning Toronto, a non-profit community organization engaged in research, policy analysis, community development and civic engagement, is a member of the SPACE Coalition and plays the lead role in supporting their research. SPACE was formed in 2000 following the implementation of new provincial funding formula policies that resulted in school boards dramatically increasing the fees they charged community groups for the use of public space. Projects conducted in 2005, 2007 and 2009 further demonstrated the impact of the Province's *Community Use of Space* (CUS) funding, policy and program and identified issues requiring policy reform and improvement. In 2009, SPACE expanded its work to gather information on access to municipal space. In 2011, SPACE released a report examining youth and their ability to access space, as our past environmental scans had identified youth as a marginalized group facing specific barriers.

Our research and mobilization efforts helped lead to a first *Community Use of Schools* investment of \$20 million annually in 2004, allocated among the 72 school boards of Ontario. In 2009, the Ontario government committed to enhancing funding of CUS to these boards, promised to reach \$66 million by 2012. SPACE also played a leadership role in advocating for the opening of schools for free in the summer, resulting in the Province's \$4 million *Focus on Youth* program in 2007. One hundred schools opened free of charge in Toronto that summer, providing space to run employment programs funded by the United Way of Greater Toronto. This program has since expanded to include schools in Ottawa, Hamilton and Windsor. We have achieved impact by causing community use of school fees to be reduced or eliminated in some places in Ontario. More work remains as fees are still high in the summer and on weekends, and several school boards increased fees in 2012.

There is strong evidence that the CUS program is in high demand and has high impact: 32% of school permit users increased their use in 2006/2007 following funding from CUS (SPACE Coalition, 2007). There are many benefits to increasing affordable access to public space; these include the promotion of social inclusion, more affordable or free programs being offered to marginalized groups, and enhanced community engagement.

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(APPENDIX A)

Community Use of Schools - Program Principles

School Activities Take Priority – Extra-curricular and parent involvement activities administered by school or school board in the after-school hours take priority.

Schools as Hubs of Communities – Community use of schools offer an effective use of taxpayers' investment in providing citizens with a place to come together, volunteer, build skills, access community programs, become physically active and build strong and healthy communities.

Support for a Positive Climate for Youth – The program supports and promotes healthy, active lifestyles for community youth.

Fair and Equal Access – Schools are welcoming and inclusive and offer fair access to use of school space at affordable rates for community purposes in non-school hours.

Respect for Roles and Responsibilities – Program stakeholder partners respect each other's roles, responsibilities and obligations to the community and education system.

Not-For-Profit Organizations to Be Charged Affordable Rates – District School Boards, where feasible, should ensure that after-hours user fees for school facilities in their district are affordable for Not-For-Profit community users.

(Ministry of Education, 2008a)

[APPENDIX B]

Survey Distribution and Respondents

Surveys were distributed electronically using *SurveyMonkey.com*.

Surveys were distributed through:

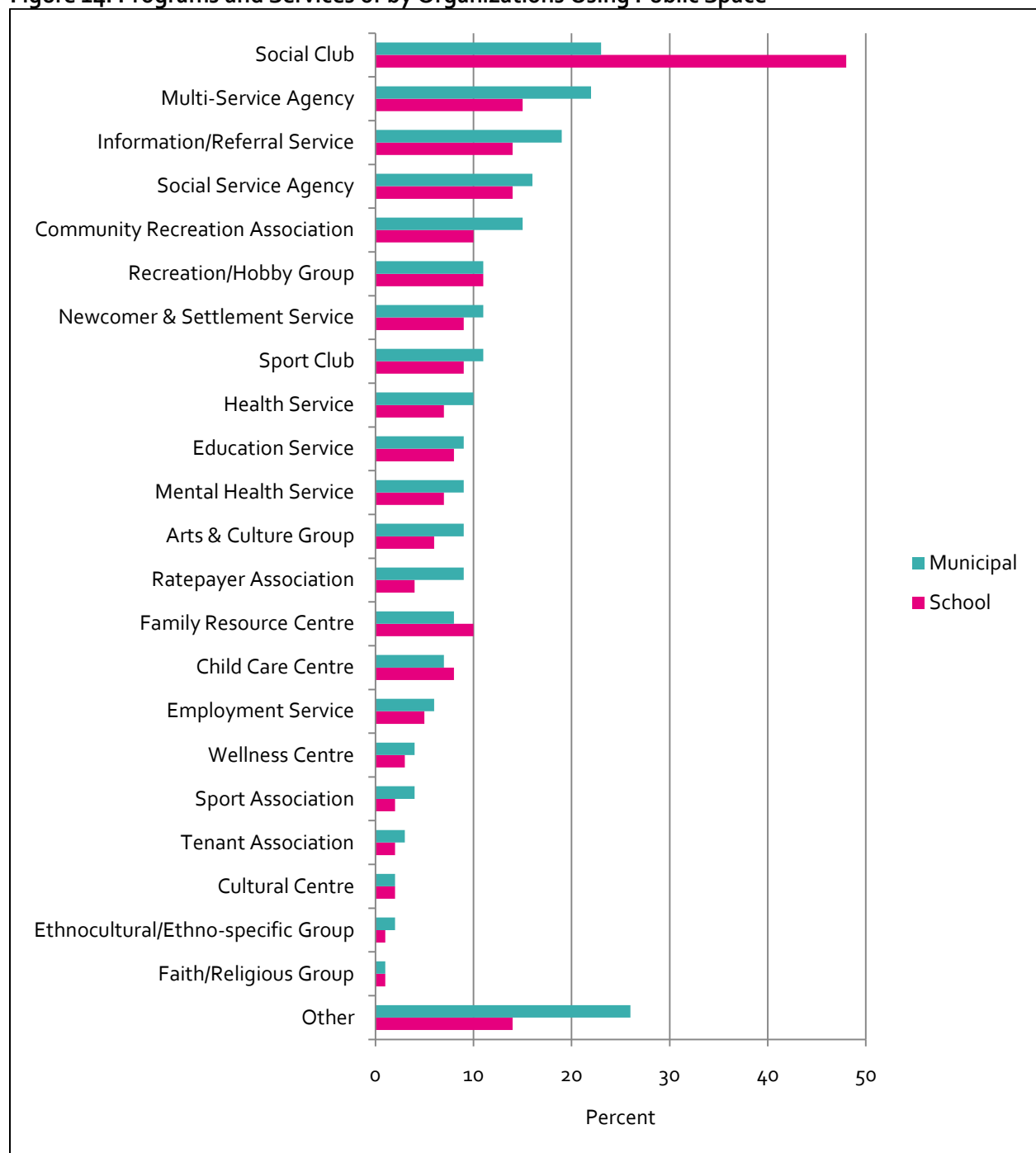
- the SPACE Coalition, which has an email list of over 300 organizations covering at least 60 of the 72 school boards across the province, and through our provincial partners including Sport4Ontario, Basketball Ontario, Scouts Canada, Girl Guides of Canada-Ontario Council, and Boys and Girls Clubs;
- the Social Planning Network of Ontario;
- Social Planning Toronto's agency list;
- organizations that had participated in the 2005, 2007, 2009 and 2011 SPACE research; and
- Colour of Poverty, arts organizations, housing groups, and youth networks.

Data from the surveys was analysed using SPSS Version 21 and Microsoft Excel. 230 surveys were completed, of which 198 provided useable data. Of these respondents, 168 permitted school space and 97 permitted municipal space. Organizations that permitted space from multiple school boards were asked to complete one survey per school board experience. Follow-up conversations were held with 17 respondents who shared details of their experiences accessing public space.

Profile of the respondents

- More than half of the respondents represented a not-for-profit agency or group and approximately one-third of agencies have charitable status.
- Respondents serve a variety of age groups, from early childhood to older adults.
- Organizations vary in size, from no full-time paid staff to more than 150 full-time paid staff.
- Collectively respondents permit space from 60 of the 72 school boards in Ontario.
- Most organizations are well-established, being in existence for more than 20 years.
- Respondents offer a variety of services and programming ranging from social clubs to health services, from arts and culture groups to sports associations (see Figure 14).

Figure 14. Programs and Services of by Organizations Using Public Space



Survey Comparison

In 2009 the SPACE Coalition conducted a similar survey to monitor progress toward and continuing barriers to accessing publicly funded assets. That year 358 surveys were received from a broad range of non-profit, community and sport organizations from school boards and municipalities across urban and rural Ontario. Results of the 2009 survey were included in this report if there was a notable difference from what was reported for 2013.

Community Outreach Coordinators' Survey

For the first time, separate surveys were sent to the specific email accounts of Community Outreach Coordinators using *SurveyMonkey.com*. Twelve out of 72 coordinators participated. Though small, this sample provided useful insights into the process of permitting school space in their region. We hope to expand this survey in future years.

