

Ontario Sport Community Summit Report

2026



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Executive Summary

The sport system in Ontario is fragmented and not working for Ontarians. Sport organizations are recovering from the disruptions of COVID-19, and adapting to the implementation of Rowan's Law, the updating of the Ontario Not-for-profit Corporations Act, as well as several national safe sport policies and initiatives including the recent publication of the Future of Sport Commission Report. All of this is happening as demands and expectations for inclusion and accessibility in sport are growing. Despite this increased complexity, funding for PSOs has remained stagnant. Academics and practitioners have called attention to the current challenges and lack of strategic direction for sport in the province. Our work aimed to address these issues directly by gathering sport leaders across many organizations for a sustained discussion on the current state and possible future for sport in Ontario.

Input from participants broadly indicated that the sport system in Ontario is fragmented, disorganized, and lacks both strategic direction and coordination. More specifically, leaders identified the following key action items for policy makers:

System Leadership, Coordination & Sustainable Investment:

1. Upskill Sport Organizations
2. Build Coalitions for Collaborative Action
3. Diversify Revenue Streams
4. Recognize Informal and Alternative Sport Settings

Sport Access & Lifelong Participation:

1. Address Fragmentation
2. Create Pathways for Lifelong Participation
3. Propagate Opportunities

Safe, Inclusive & Holistic Sport:

1. Keep Sport Fun
2. Establish and Implement Best Practices
3. Commit to Equity
4. Standardize Safe Sport

These action items are intended to support a strategic direction for sport in the province. Overwhelmingly, participants suggested that fragmentation has weakened the political imperative to make sport more accessible for everyone. A lack of a unified plan and a clear structure for sport in Ontario has exacerbated challenges throughout the sport system and puts organizations at substantial risk for governance failures or system-level collapse. We encourage sport leaders, organizers, policy makers, and general community members to take these action items into their work, and use them to support their organizing, management and advocacy.

**WRITE A LETTER
TO YOUR MPP**



Introduction

In Ontario, sport is delivered by a complex network of organizations. These include public organizations (e.g., Municipal Recreation Departments, school boards) as well as many private organizations that operate as both non-profit (e.g., provincial organizations, community sport clubs, sport-for-development organizations) as well as commercial organizations (e.g., training academies, gyms, for profit clubs, etc.). These organizations all make up the infrastructure that we know as the Ontario Sport System.

Provincial sport organizations (PSOs) and multisport organizations (MSOs) support over 7,400 community sport organizations (CSOs) with over 3.1 million members in the Province of Ontario¹. However, in the last five years, the management of CSOs has become increasingly complex and support for sport governance in Ontario has waned. Sport development is negatively impacted by a lack of strategy for the sector, and as a result it is often plagued by tensions between sport organizations, municipalities, and school boards². Without a clear vision and action plan, there are no metrics to guide direction or measure progress, and the sector lacks a unified voice³. Our work sought to address these issues directly by gathering sport leaders across many organizations for a sustained discussion on the current state and possible future for sport in Ontario.



Ontario Sport Sector In Numbers

Sport GDP in Ontario is the highest of all provinces and territories⁴

**\$7.6
BILLION**



3 IN 10 Ontarians participate in sport weekly⁵



1 in 7 Ontarians serve as a coach in sport, investing over **600M** hours into their communities⁶

In 2023, the sport and recreation sector accounted for approximately

42,000 JOBS⁷

National and international amateur sport events hosted in Ontario generate economic impact of **over \$15 million** every two years⁸



67% of Ontario youth aged 6-29 participate in sports, with 37% participating mostly in organized individual or team sports and 30% mostly participating casually⁹

Context

The year 2025 was a landmark year for sport in Canada. The Canada Games were hosted in Newfoundland and the Federal-Provincial/Territorial Sport Committee endorsed the 2025-2035 Canadian Sport Policy. At the same time the Future of Sport Commission conducted investigations into abuse and maltreatment, ultimately making calls to action intended to drastically reshape the structures and governance of sport across the country, with a focus on safe sport and harm reduction, as well as system alignment and leadership.



In Ontario, the sport system was already adapting to an impactful series of changes. While recovering from large-scale disruptions of COVID-19, sport organizations were also adapting to the implementation of Rowan’s Law, the updating of the Ontario Not-for-profit Corporations Act, and several national safe sport policies and initiatives - as well as growth in demands and expectations for inclusion and accessibility in sport settings. Despite this increased complexity, funding for PSOs (who are strategically positioned to support these adaptations) has remained stagnant.

“Despite this increased complexity, funding for Provincial Sport Organizations (who are strategically positioned to support these adaptations) has remained stagnant.”



Recently, academics and practitioner organizations have called attention to the need for a sustained conversation about the current challenges and future directions of sport in the province. Indeed, important work is being done and calls for change in sport have been made from several different organizations. All of these calls to action have been sounding the alarm. Sport in Ontario is in a precarious position, and without leadership and support to navigate these changes, the system risks collapse. For example:

Research out of the **Sport and Recreation Policy Lab at Brock University** has been working to understand the implications of regional policy within sport policy processes across Canada¹⁰. This project provided a robust understanding of the role of the Province of Ontario in multi-level governance of sport in Canada³. This work highlighted:

- A lack of strategy and vision at the provincial level has led to confusion, policy misalignment, and disorganization within the sector.
- The absence of a unified voice in amateur sport results in fragmented efforts and hinders the development of sport in the province.
- The role and location of sport within the government influences resources, support, and the expectations of sport in Ontario.
- Jurisdictional tensions between sport organizations, municipalities, and school boards have negatively affected sport programming and facility access.



Sport in Ontario is in a precarious position, and without leadership and support to navigate these changes, the system risks collapse.



The **Community Sport Council of Ontario's Community Sports Sector Sustainability Report**¹¹ is a comprehensive research initiative with the ultimate goal of informing policy decisions, contributing to strategic priorities, and shaping future initiatives that support the growth and sustainability of the sector. Their research indicated that:

- Sport organizations leverage volunteer training to boost operational efficiency with local support. Sport programs for youth and marginalized groups promote social integration and mental health, with partnerships improving access and equity. Targeted programs for women, girls, and minorities can advance gender equity and rights.
- Other sport partnerships or non-traditional partners such as municipal, healthcare, local businesses and service clubs are important to success. Examples of other community sport organizations are: Sport for Development charities, Special Olympics, Charitable NFP, Volunteer Centre.
- Ontario-based sport organizations should regularly use summative and formative evaluations with Key Performance Indicators and stay informed about community demographic changes. Key evaluation types include enrolment numbers, satisfaction surveys, board evaluations, and program leader assessments.

MLSE's Change the Game Research Project, is built from an anonymous online survey working with youth and parents to understand sport and physical activity-related access, engagement, and equity issues across Ontario. They found that:

- Household income is a key determinant of youth participation in sport and physical activity, with participation becoming more structured as income increases, whether in organized or casual settings.
 - Youth from households earning above \$80K are 17% more likely to participate in both casual and organized sport and/or physical activity.
 - Youth from families with a household income of \$20K or less were more likely to participate in pickup or drop-in opportunities, informally with friends or family, alone, or in programs at community and recreation centers.
 - Highest-income households show the strongest engagement in organized sport.



- Engagement varies widely among different demographics:
 - Boys/young men show the highest participation rates, with 89% engaged in organized (59%) or casual (31%) sport.
 - Girls/young women are significantly less likely to participate: 76% engage in casual (39%) or organized (36%) sport.
 - Gender-diverse youth (non-binary, Two-Spirit, self-described) show participation and frequency rates equal to or lower than girls/young women.
 - Youth with identified mental health disabilities reported high rates of non-participation, with half (50%) reporting not participating in sport at all.
 - Having an interest in professional sport is one of the strongest predictors of sport participation. Yet, collaborations between professional and community sport organizations are underdeveloped.
 - Youth from northern Ontario living in lower-income households are impacted by their income level, geography, and scarcity of infrastructure.
- 83% of youth strongly or somewhat agree that sport has a positive impact on their mental health and 77% of sport participants rated their sense of belonging to their local community as very strong or somewhat strong, compared to 46% of youth not active in sport.

Across various reports and research projects, people are citing a lack of support and coordination. These calls also highlight a need for stronger coherence and leadership in the Ontario sport system.



Methodology

In the context of a turbulent and quickly changing sport landscape, we sought to convene a group of individuals and organizations committed to sport in Ontario, from a variety of different backgrounds, including both practitioners and academics. As a lack of connection and coordination within the sector is repeatedly identified as an issue, we wanted to bring people together and dedicate time to discussing the pressing needs of the sport system in the province. Ultimately, we sought to create a platform for the discussion of what the sport sector wants to see in a plan for sport.

Our goals were threefold:

- 1. Examine and critically assess the current landscape of sport governance in Ontario – particularly in relation to other jurisdictions in Canada and internationally.**
- 2. Propose theoretically informed and contextually appropriate governance practices and capacity building initiatives for sport organizations in Ontario.**
- 3. Engage sport-sector actors in discussions about current and future policy and research directions for sport governance in the province.**

We began by hosting a series of workshops to identify key focus areas. We brought together fifteen individuals from a range of organizations representing non-profit (e.g., CSOs, MSOs, and PSOs), charitable, commercial, and academic organizations as well as policy makers. We discussed the current landscape of the sport system in Ontario and heard speakers from other jurisdictions in Canada and internationally. Next, we brainstormed the main themes of what we need to focus on moving forward.

Through a series of workshops, we collaboratively developed the following three thematic areas that would be the focus of our discussions:

1) System leadership, coordination, and sustainable investment

There is a need for stronger coherence and leadership in the sport system in Ontario to reduce fragmentation and build resiliency. Shared priorities should include enhancing sector-wide coordination, improving governance structures and practices, fostering cross-sector alignment, and ensuring sustainable investment in sport. These elements are essential for shaping a sport system that is inclusive, transparent, organized, and capable of meeting the needs of all Ontarians in all sporting contexts.



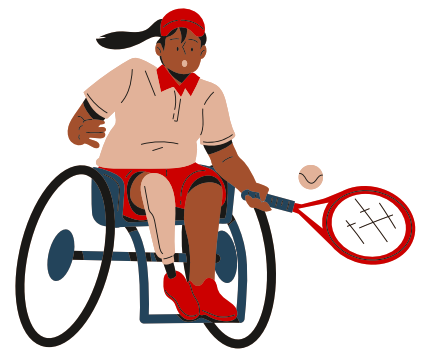


(2) Sport access and lifelong participation

Ensuring meaningful access to sport for all Ontarians across the lifespan remains a central concern. Addressing systemic and structural barriers to participation, particularly for underrepresented and underserved populations is a key priority. There is also a need for a supportive infrastructure of people and programs including volunteers, coaches, school/community partnerships, and community sport facilities to promote sustained engagement in sport at all levels throughout one's life.

(3) Safe, inclusive, and holistic sport

The quality of the sport experience is as important as access to participation. This area underscores the importance of fostering safe, inclusive, and welcoming environments across all levels of participation. It also highlights the value of designing flexible, participant-centred pathways that support diverse motivations and stages of life and recognizes the important role that informal and unsanctioned sport spaces play in the broader sport landscape.



Underpinning each theme is a need to consider the implications of mass sport participation, elite sport development, and sport for development (of non-sport outcomes). Further, each topic identified reflects an area where we discussed how to connect research and practice to develop evidence-informed approaches and innovative models. Together, these topics provided a foundation for our discussion focused on how we can strengthen sport in Ontario.



The Ontario Sport Community Summit

Next, we hosted the Ontario Sport Community Summit. On November 19th, 2025, partners from the MLSE LaunchPad, the Ontario Sport Network, Brock University, and the University of Toronto brought together leaders from across the province to discuss Sport in Ontario. Building on our series of research projects and workshops, the meeting aimed to synthesize knowledge on the current state of sport in the province, highlight leaders and innovators in sport, and begin a discussion about a roadmap towards shared goals for the future of sport in Ontario.



The event brought together over **160 participants** in a hybrid format. Participants included representatives from CSOs, PSOs, MSOs, community sport councils, charitable organizations, policy makers, and academics. For each thematic area, we heard from a panel of experts including an academic, a representative of a PSO, and a representative from a CSO. After each panel, the entire group discussed what they heard and identified key ideas and action items moving forward.

Our discussions were tracked and recorded, resulting in over **140 inputs** across the three thematic areas. These inputs were then distilled down into key action items for each thematic area.



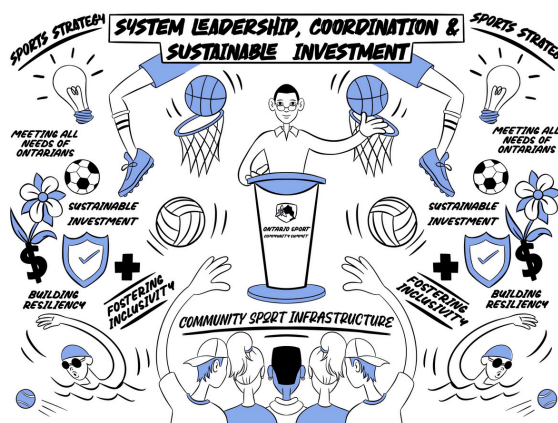
Action Items

Broadly, participants discussed a sport system that is fragmented, disorganized, and lacking in strategic direction and coordination. Across participation contexts, and sectors, issues were brought forward that suggest extreme precarity among organizations, and doubt in leadership and governance processes in the province. The status quo is not working, and actors from across the sector expressed both worry and concern. They recognized the immense potential of sport to contribute to the social, cultural, and economic wellbeing of Ontarians, but they sounded the alarm on the effects of a lack of strategic direction and disconnection between policy makers and the organizations working to deliver sport in the province.

Specifically, participants suggested the following action items.

System Leadership, Coordination & Sustainable Investment:

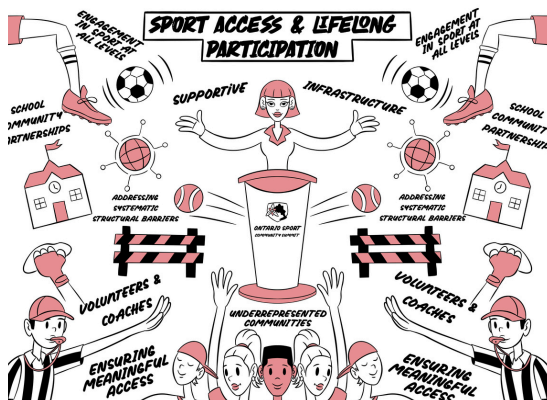
1. Upskill Sport Organizations - Sport needs to professionalize so there is more support, education, and accountability for the sector. The sector must encourage collaboration to create diverse streams of funding. Organizations need to know how to demonstrate their value and that the access to sport they provide is in the best interest of all citizens.



2. Build Coalitions for Collaborative Action– We need connections that encourage an aligned mandate across sectors (Education/School Boards, Municipalities, Sport Organizations, Youth and Social Service Agencies) to lobby and advocate for sport, show the value of participation to the public, access sport facilities, and improve sport quality/access. This includes partnerships with both traditional (e.g., CSOs) and non-traditional (e.g., charitable & commercial) groups, and ensure all levels understand the importance of these collaboration efforts. This will allow for intentional and sustainable pathways that allow for the sharing of best practices and policies, and standardization across sports and participation contexts.

3. **Diversify Revenue Streams** - Collectively, we must develop creative strategies to create new investments for infrastructure and programming. This can happen through corporate partnerships and collaboration with local businesses, as well as exploring new models of programming such as digital or hybrid delivery. Engaging partners such as private businesses will encourage quick and responsive solutions that are not always found when solely relying on non-profit organizations and government-supported mandates/initiatives. We also must address how our current system operates in a way where sport organizations feel they need to compete with one another, as opposed to collaborating.
4. **Recognize Informal and Alternative Sport Settings** - Sport leaders want concrete examples of how to allocate resources for informal sport and transparency about the cost of setting up informal sport or organized sport taking place in non-traditional settings. There is a need to recognize and acknowledge the participation opportunities that exist outside of traditional sport clubs.

Sport Access & Lifelong Participation:

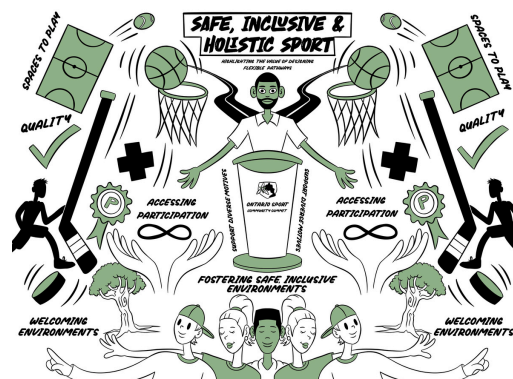


1. **Address Fragmentation** - Regional differences across the province are a central challenge of sport accessibility. There needs to be strong local representation to challenge the fragmentation of sport in Ontario in order to make sport accessible for everyone – no matter where they live.

2. **Create Pathways for Lifelong Participation** - There is a need to create meaningful, accessible, lifelong pathways for sport participation. This can happen by diversifying adult participation opportunities beyond traditional venues, and by increasing awareness of various sport programs that attract a diverse age range. Further, a better understanding of first contact, sport transition, drop out, and retention patterns will help to retain more participants in sport.
3. **Propagate Opportunities** – We all must advocate for more facilities and spaces to play and to develop standards across our organizations to address barriers to participation. Utilizing creative resources such as MultiSport Discovery Days, Sport Passports, and exit feedback on why participants leave sport, will allow for insight on how to encourage lifelong participation. By accessing underused public infrastructure and encouraging play through opportunities accessible to the community (e.g., public courts), we can create lifelong pathways for sport access.

Safe, Inclusive & Holistic Sport:

1. **Keep Sport Fun** - Assess the role of professionalization in youth sport and develop strategies that maintain inclusive community and competitive pathways while preventing gaps that may arise if private, profit-driven programs fill unmet demand.



2. **Establish and Implement Best Practices** -

To begin shifting the culture, we must actively bridge the gap between research and practice - recognizing that sport, as it currently operates, is often inherently exclusive. Through translating and disseminating knowledge in ways that influence administrators, coaches, parents, and communities, we need to foster longevity, holistic development, and sustainable engagement in sport.

3. **Commit to Equity** - Develop inclusive sport environments by integrating equity-focused practices within existing programs. This includes utilizing innovative solutions such as implementing registration processes that allow participants to confidentially request financial assistance or contribute to supporting others facing financial barriers, ensuring safe and affirming participation for all athletes, and balancing visibility of underrepresented groups with the core sport value of playing together in shared spaces.

4. **Standardize Safe Sport** - Connect safe sport policy imperatives to related sectors that can help and support shared goals (e.g. health, education, social services) and ensure the Universal Code of Conduct for Maltreatment in Sport (UCCMS) is employed and followed throughout the entire system in order to make known sanctions and violations of the code public.

Across all of the action items identified, fragmentation was a distinct underlying problem highlighted by participants. A lack of a unified plan and a clear structure for sport in Ontario has exacerbated challenges throughout the sport system. Overwhelmingly, participants suggested that fragmentation has weakened the political imperative to make sport more accessible for everyone. It is vital we look to other industry system examples that have strong solutions for connectivity, collaboration, and sharing of resources, and work towards solutions for the sport sector.


Next Steps

The Ontario Sport Community Summit aimed to begin building a collective discussion, but the work is far from over. Throughout these initiatives we identified shared priorities for sport governance and focused on some important action items for how sport can be better managed for Ontarians. The action items identified at the Summit are intended to support a strategic direction for sport in the province. However, change is not easy. It will take time, buy-in from a range of actors across the sector, and political will from policy makers at all levels of government.

We encourage sport leaders, organizers, policy makers, and general community members to take these action items into their work, and use them to support their organizing, management, and advocacy. We encourage everyone connected to the sport system to share them with colleagues, friends, and neighbours, and use them to inform and support the discussions that are already happening across the sector.

What you can do:

There is no one single way forward. The challenges identified in this report are complex and demanding issues that are constantly evolving. Nevertheless, this report highlights essential opportunities to improve the sport system in Ontario, and identifies key issues that sport leaders are looking for strategic direction on. Importantly, there was an overwhelming consensus about fragmentation in the Ontario sport system and addressing a lack of coordination across the system was understood as an important first step to addressing other issues. Our calls to action emphasize a need for policy makers to re-evaluate how we are aligning as a sector, so that we can move forward with a unified approach to decision making that works for all Ontarians.



“...an overwhelming consensus about fragmentation in the Ontario sport sector and addressing a lack of coordination across the system was understood as an important first step to addressing other issues.”

Here are a few ways you can use the action items listed in the report:

- 1** Recognize where and how your organization is contributing to the work identified within this report and the opportunities you have to support these objectives. Bring the report to your board and discuss how your work aligns with the issues across the sector and what new initiatives could support the action items your organization feels most strongly about.


- 2** If this reports highlights issues that align with the challenges or successes you are experiencing in your organization, use the report as a starting point for a conversation with your members, community partners, or your PSO.


- 3** Write a letter to your local Member of Provincial Parliament to express your concern about the state of sport in Ontario (use the link below!). Use this report (and the ones highlighted above) to substantiate your concerns, and articulate the calls to action above as possible changes.



WRITE A LETTER
TO YOUR MPP



LEARN MORE ABOUT THE
WORK AT THE SPORT AND
RECREATION POLICY LAB



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