

# Scaling K-12 Adaptive Sports Programming and Developing Successful Partnerships



**ADAPTIVE SPORTS & FITNESS**

UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

Brian Elliott, Community Program Coordinator  
Erik Robeznieks, Associate Director

# Adaptive Sport and Inclusive Recreation Initiative (ASIRI)

Aims to increase awareness, knowledge, access, and participation in adaptive sports in the k-12 education system. Currently, ASIRI is embedded into the general physical education classes at nine public middle schools and five high schools, with the ultimate goal of expanding Nation-wide.





# Timeline

## 2020 - Michigan Health Endowment Fund (MHEF)

- **Result:** Unsuccessful
- **Proposal Summary:** Purchase adaptive sports equipment packages, distribute to several counties across SE Michigan, adaptive sports physical education programs, and an interscholastic league
- **Rationale for Decision from Sponsor:**
  - Why is 6th grade the ideal time for school based intervention?
  - Is this only for kids with disabilities?
  - How does your organization propose to establish relationship with school administrators?
  - Who is going to lead the programming?
  - How are you going to ensure that PE teachers will incorporate adaptive sports in PE?
  - What is the sustainability plan?



## 2020 / 2021 Academic Year

- ***School Districts Served:*** Ann Arbor Public Schools (7 schools)
- ***Grades Served:*** Grade 6
- ***Key Activities:***
  - Relationship building with AAPS PE Lead
  - Virtual professional development for Middle School Physical Education Teachers - what we refer to as “Disability Awareness and ASIRI Training”
  - Lesson plan development and content creation
  - Adaptive Fitness and Adaptive Yoga introduced in general physical education curriculum
- ***Constraints:*** COVID-19, equipment, virtual and hybrid learning, experience







## 2021 - Michigan Health Endowment Fund (MHEF)

- ***Result:*** Successful - 1 year grant
- ***Proposal Summary:*** Adaptive sports equipment packages, equipment transportation, storage, monitoring and evaluation, school assemblies, and PE programming
- ***Rationale for Decision from Sponsor:***
  - Established relationships
  - Manageable focus - 6th Grade only
  - Social and environmental change focus
  - Clear repeatable - reusable - impactful Outputs
  - Sustainable action plan



## 2021 / 2022 Academic Year

- ***School Districts Served:*** Ann Arbor Public Schools (7 schools)
- ***Grades Served:*** Grade 6
- ***Key Activities:***
  - Relationship building with AAPS PE Teachers
  - In-person professional development with PE Teachers (DAT and ASIRI Training)
  - Assemblies at each school (Abilities Awareness Event)
  - Lesson plan development and content creation
  - 2 weeks of goalball / sitting volleyball + 2 weeks of wheelchair basketball and tennis + adaptive yoga and fitness
- ***Lessons learned:*** Parent push-back, new for PE teachers, equipment difficulties, PE teacher buy-in



## 2022 / 2023 Academic Year

- ***School Districts Served:*** Ann Arbor Public Schools (7 schools)
- ***Grades Served:*** Grade 6
- ***Key Activities:***
  - Relationship building with AAPS PE Teachers
  - In-person professional development with PE Teachers (DAT and ASIRI Training)
  - Assemblies at each school (Abilities Awareness Event)
  - Supplemental teaching resources (expansion of curriculum)
  - 2 weeks of goalball / sitting volleyball + 2 weeks of wheelchair basketball and tennis
- ***Lessons learned:*** PE teacher professional development needs, teacher turnover, scalability



## 2023 - Community Health Services (CHS)

- **Result:** Successful - 3 year grant
- **Proposal Summary:** Take what we have done, and learned, and expand ASIRI to grades 7 and 8 in AAPS. Additionally, expand ASIRI to neighboring city (Ypsilanti - two middle schools). Added 1 staff member to lead coordination and programming. Added 1 staff member to lead monitoring and evaluation.
- **Rationale for Decision from Sponsor:**
  - Proof of concept
  - Addressing social determinants of health and social isolation
  - Expanding ASIRI to an under resourced school system



## 2023 / 2024 Academic Year

- ***School Districts Served:*** Ann Arbor Public Schools (7 schools)
- ***Grades Served:*** Grade 6, 7, 8
- ***Key Activities:***
  - Community Program Coordinator & M&E Coordinator
  - In-person professional development with PE Teachers (DAT and ASIRI Training)
  - Assemblies at each school (Abilities Awareness Event)
  - Supplemental teaching resources (expansion of curriculum)
  - 3 weeks of goalball / sitting volleyball + 3 weeks of wheelchair basketball and tennis
- ***Challenges:*** Focus group results and building a relationship with the new schools in Ypsilanti



## 2024 / 2025 Academic Year

- ***School Districts and Grades Served:***

- Ann Arbor Public Schools (7 schools): Gr. 6 - 8
- Saline Middle School (1 school): Gr. 6
- Ypsilanti Community Middle School (1 school): Gr. 6 - 8



- ***Key Activities:***

- In-person professional development with PE Teachers (DAT and ASIRI Training)
- Expanded equipment packages to serve new schools
- Assemblies at each school (Abilities Awareness Event)
- Development of video resources
- 3 weeks of goalball / sitting volleyball + 3 weeks of wheelchair basketball and tennis
- ASIRI Day

● ***Challenges:*** Expanding to Ypsilanti



ADAPTIVE SPORTS & FITNESS  
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN



## 2025 - Move United / Gatorade Equity in Sports Grant

- ***Result:*** Successful - 1 year grant
- ***Proposal Summary:*** Expand ASIRI to serve high schools in our area, building on the proven model in middle schools.
- ***Rationale for Decision from Sponsor:***
  - High school is a key demographic for supporting sport participation and retention
  - ASIRI has proof of concept at the middle school level



## 2025 / 2026 Academic Year

- ***School Districts and Grades Served:***

- Ann Arbor Public Schools (12 schools): Gr. 6 - 8, 9-12
- Saline Middle School (1 school): Gr. 6 - 8
- Ypsilanti Community Middle School (1 school): Gr. 6 - 8

- ***Key Activities:***

- 3 weeks of goalball / sitting volleyball + 3 weeks of wheelchair basketball
- Pilot expansion into high schools
- Expanded ASIRI Day

- ***Challenges:*** Repeating programming at Ypsilanti, entry into high school PE programming



## 2025 - Michigan Health Endowment Fund Grant

- **Result:** Successful - 2 year grant (funding started this year)
- **Proposal Summary:** Expand ASIRI to serve high schools in our area, building on the proven model in middle schools. Create online resources for ASIRI for professional development and lesson plan content.
- **Rationale for Decision from Sponsor:**
  - ASIRI has proof of concept at the middle school level
  - Trust built from previous grant and demonstrated success in scaling the work
  - Key selling point was making ASIRI accessible to a broader audience



# Lessons Learned



# Barriers: Getting Started

At the beginning we had no relationships with:

- Funders
- Community Partners

Our original idea was:

- Too ambitious with no build-up
- Scattered with no central focus
- Not sustainable

The initiative operationally lacked:

- Staff capacity and competency
- Community buy-in
- A monitoring and evaluation plan with efficacy
- Infrastructure



# Barriers: Getting Started Continued

## Organizational

- Internal & External
  - Compliance with procedures
  - Administrative Delays
  - Calendars of established events



## **Barriers: Getting Started: Addressed**

**Funders:** We started building a relationship with grant agencies to better understand agency goals and outcomes.

**Community Partners:** We established and nurtured relationships with partners like Project Healthy Schools, the Disability Network, and Ann Arbor Public Schools.

**Revised Plan:** Built with our community partners to identify realistic deliverables and much smaller and more reasonable goals.

**Operationally:** We developed a plan for how to support the implementation and tracking of the initiative to measure success.

**Organizational:** Started planning and communicating earlier and asking what is needed.

# Getting Started: Building Relationships

- Identify the possible stakeholders that are working in parallel, there could be potential project partners that already have relationships, or expertise, or other resources that could be mutually beneficial
- It is essential to create a program with a partner, not for a population
- Create a shared vision, objectives, and outcomes
- Establish trust amongst partners



# Building New Relationships

- In partnerships, trust is built when others feel their voice, mission, and autonomy are protected not absorbed into yours
  - Example: ASIRI involves collaboration between ASF, the school board, and the Disability Network. The funding agency can be interpreted as a silent partner!
- Psychological safety is key to creating a “safe-to-partner” mentality early
- Before discussing the program in detail, establish:
  - There is no expectation of agreement
  - Your input may change the direction
  - You are not committing by being in this conversation
- Stay longer in the exploration phase than feels efficient by focusing on:
  - Learning their constraints
  - Understanding their priorities
  - Surfacing differences early

# Building New Relationships: The Art of Co-Creating

- Use an IDEA Framework: Identify, Describe, Exchange, Action
  - Identify: “We’re trying to address [community need], and we believe collaboration is necessary to do it well.”
  - Describe: “We’ve been considering a program that does X, but it’s early and incomplete.”
  - Exchange: “What are we missing? Where does this align or conflict with your work? What concerns would you have about something like this?”
  - Action: “Does it make sense to explore a pilot together? What would a partnership need to look like to work for you?”
- Move to a “Power With” mindset in having conversations
  - Let others shape the agenda
  - Incorporate their ideas into visible changes
  - Name when their input changed your thinking or approach

# Nurturing the Partnership

- Invite “safe disagreement”
  - “Where would this not work for your organization?”
  - “What concerns would you have partnering on something like this?”
- Be transparent about goals and constraints by being clear about:
  - What you need from the partnership
  - What success looks like for you
  - What flexibility you do/do not have
- Create opportunities for consistent feedback and demonstrate when and how that feedback is implemented



# Growing Pains: Addressing Scalability

## Review of Timeline

- 2020/21: AAPS Grade 6: Adaptive Yoga and Fitness
- 2021/22: AAPS Gr. 6: Goalball, Sitting Volleyball, Wheelchair Basketball, Wheelchair Tennis, Adaptive Yoga, Adaptive Fitness
- 2022/23 and 23/24: AAPS Gr. 6: Goalball, Sitting Volleyball, Wheelchair Basketball, Wheelchair Tennis
- 2024/25: AAPS Gr. 6-8, Saline Gr. 6, Ypsi Gr. 6-8: Goalball, Sitting Volleyball, Wheelchair Basketball, Wheelchair Tennis
- 2025/26: AAPS Gr. 6-12, Saline and Ypsi Gr. 6-8: Goalball, Sitting Volleyball, Wheelchair Basketball



# Expanding to New Environments: “The Pivot”

- We received a grant from Community Health Services to expanding ASIRI into new schools - specifically in Ypsilanti
- Reality:
  - Strong progress with one partner (YCMS)
  - No traction with another (Lincoln MS)
  - Pivot to include Saline
- Even a free, evidence-based program with strong outcomes does not guarantee partnership
- Partnership is not about the quality of your program. It’s about trust, context, and relationships.



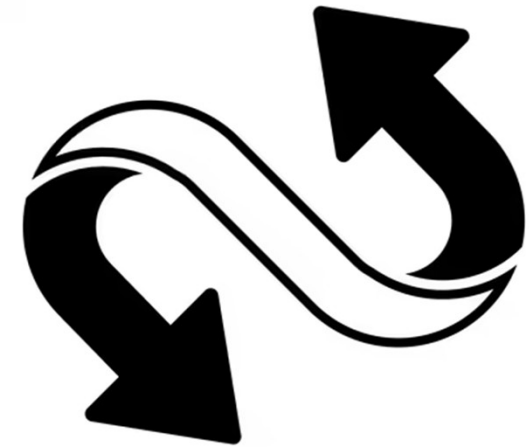
# Expanding to New Environments: “The Pivot”

- The reality of what we experienced:
  - Schools are overloaded
  - Administrative barriers exist even with no cost
  - Timing, staffing, and competing priorities matter
  - Relationships take time to develop
- If partners don't want to engage, for whatever reason above, sometimes that happens in a silent decline and that is OK
- When did things start going right?
  - In-person visit to YCMS
  - Learning their context (move, staffing, student challenges)
  - The key teaching point: Trust accelerated when we shifted from pitching to understanding



# “What worked in Ann Arbor does not automatically work in Ypsilanti”

- Key differences:
  - Resource availability
  - Administrative capacity
  - Staff bandwidth
  - Student needs
- When entering a new environment:
  - Do not assume transferability
  - Do not place learning burden on partners
  - Adapt to their system, not vice versa
- “Our model is one way, not the way”
  - This needs to be understood not just by your team but by your funders

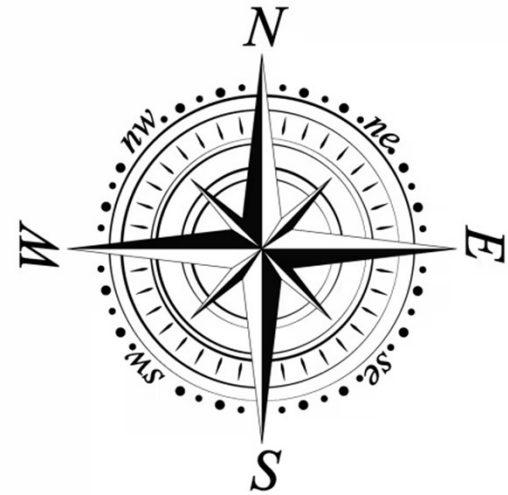


FLEXIBILITY



# Navigating Conflict or “Failure”

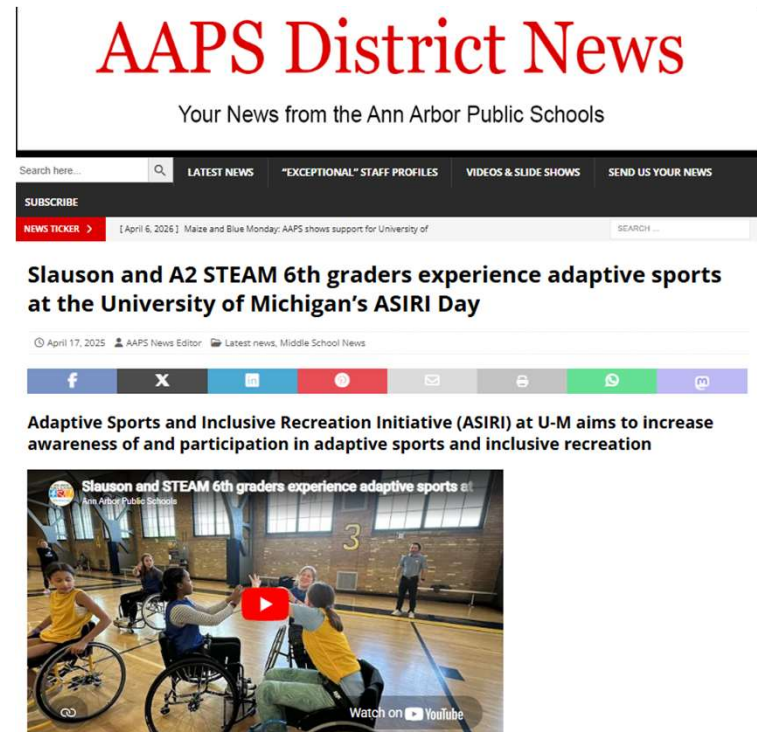
- Even without authority, we carry power:
  - University affiliation
  - Funding source
  - Program ownership
- Power With Approach:
  - What would work here?
  - What concerns do you have?
  - How can we adapt this together?
- If you have a failed attempt with a partner
  - Do not force it - this damages the reputation of your organization
  - Stay in relationship mode with keeping the door open and light touch points
  - Pivot strategically (e.g. shift to Saline while continuing Lincoln outreach)



# Partnerships

**Key Take Away:** The success of a program is not defined by where it launches first. It is defined by the relationships that sustain it over time.

- Finding a champion that understands the vision takes time
- Strategic support
  - Equipment suppliers
  - Transportation and storage
  - Your organization



The screenshot shows the AAPS District News website. The main heading is "AAPS District News" in red, with the subtitle "Your News from the Ann Arbor Public Schools". Below the heading is a search bar and navigation links for "LATEST NEWS", "EXCEPTIONAL STAFF PROFILES", "VIDEOS & SLIDE SHOWS", and "SEND US YOUR NEWS". A "SUBSCRIBE" button is also visible. The main article is titled "Slauson and A2 STEAM 6th graders experience adaptive sports at the University of Michigan's ASIRI Day", dated April 17, 2025. Below the article title is a social media sharing bar with icons for Facebook, X, LinkedIn, Email, Print, and YouTube. The article text reads: "Adaptive Sports and Inclusive Recreation Initiative (ASIRI) at U-M aims to increase awareness of and participation in adaptive sports and inclusive recreation". Below the text is a video player showing a group of students in wheelchairs participating in adaptive sports in a gymnasium. The video player has a red play button and a "Watch on YouTube" link.



# Growing Pains: Addressing Scalability

- Equipment
  - Quantity
  - Size
  - Repairs and Maintenance
  - Storage
- Lesson Plans and Curriculum
  - Familiarity
  - Skill Progression
  - Volume
- Professional Development
  - Teacher Turnover
  - Teacher Buy-In
  - Efficacy and Retention of Messaging
  - Independence



# Scalability: Online Education

- Broader reach and accessibility
- Create educational instructional videos
- Assist with teaching and providing visual examples
- Development of curricula and courses for educators
  - Expansion of the Teach the Teacher model



# Creating Pathways for Growing Involvement

- ASIRI Day
- Equipment Loan Program
- I Am An Athlete Too
- Miller Family Open
- Community Drop-In Programming and Clinics





Q & A



umichadaptivesports



University of Michigan  
Adaptive Sports & Fitness



asfoffice@umich.edu



Join our mailing list:  
*Events*  
*Competitions*  
*Volunteer Opportunities*  
*Paid Internships*  
*Drop-in Programs*  
*Clinics and Education*



ellbrian@umich.edu



erikrob@umich.edu