

**February 2017**

*A team of health leaders in Arkansas is targeting the state's obesity epidemic through the Healthy Active Arkansas plan, which launched in 2015. A major component of the plan is to foster environments that support healthy physical activity. In response to fiscal and administrative constraints among schools and local governments that have limited access to recreational space to engage in an adequate amount of physical activity, a new legal tool has emerged called the joint use agreement (JUA). JUAs allow shared use of public property or facilities needed to maintain a healthy and active lifestyle at little or no additional cost to the participating organizations.<sup>1</sup> The Arkansas Center for Health Improvement's Health Policy Board recommends JUAs to increase access to safe and secure places for physical activities and to expand access to physical activity.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

School districts, government entities, faith-based organizations, and private or nonprofit organizations may enter into joint use agreements (JUAs) to allow shared access to their property or facilities before or after hours.<sup>2</sup> JUAs provide access to safe and affordable recreational spaces. Public and private property owners can open underutilized facilities for community use. JUAs have a wide range of benefits including: increased physical activity, reduced risk of chronic disease, reduced stress, stronger community ties, better classroom behavior, and improved academic performance.<sup>3</sup>

JUAs allow shared use of public property or facilities by defining terms and conditions for sharing the costs and risks related to expanding a property's use. The National Policy & Legal Analysis Network has developed model JUAs, but local methods to develop an agreement vary.<sup>1</sup> Approximately 62 percent of school districts nationwide have entered into JUAs, but they are most common in urban areas, in large school districts, and in western part of the U.S. Only 55 percent of school districts in southern states, where obesity and physical inactivity rates are higher, have entered into JUAs.<sup>4</sup>

## **ARKANSAS JOINT USE AGREEMENTS**

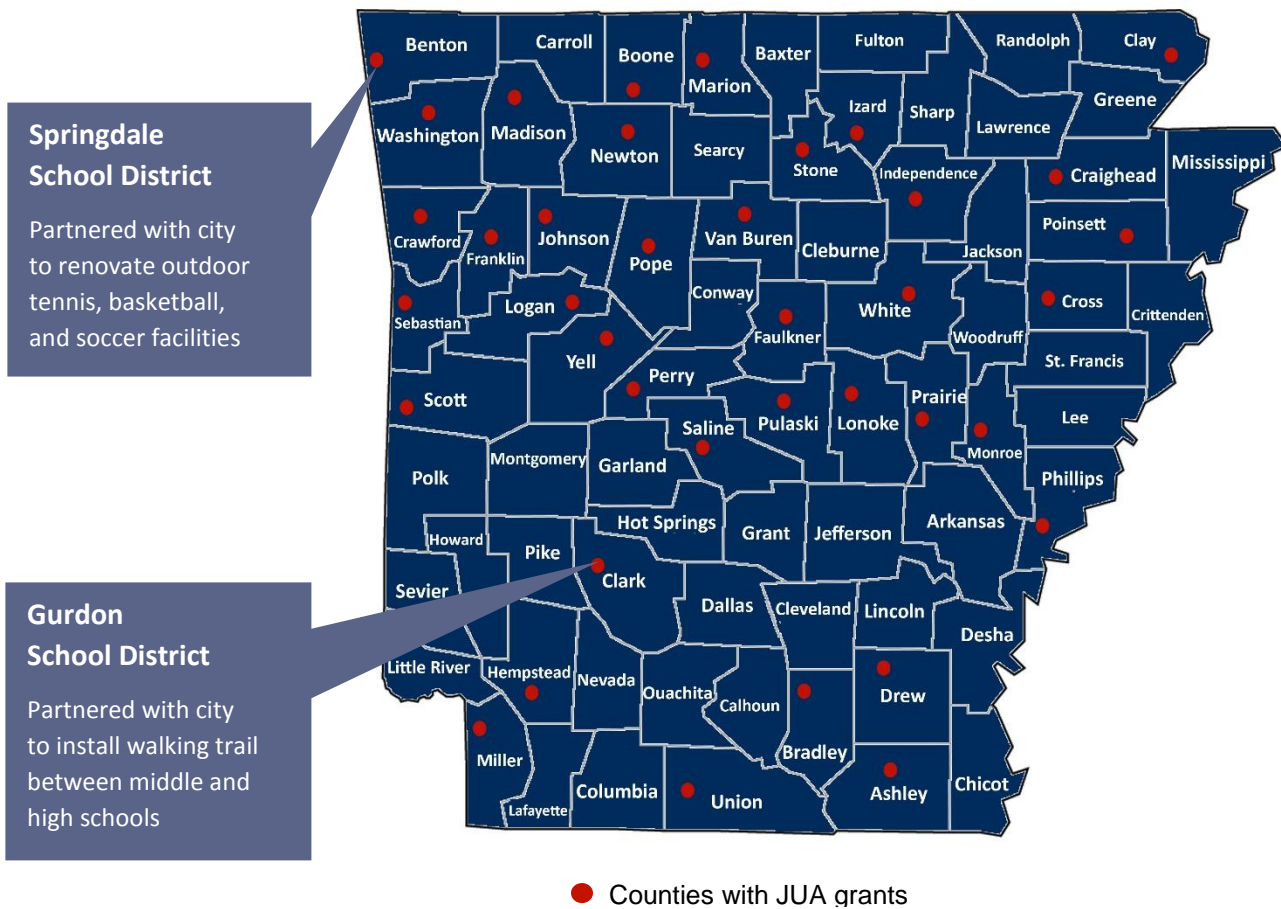
The Arkansas Department of Education offers an annual, competitive JUA grant, funded by the tobacco excise tax passed by the Arkansas General Assembly in 2009. The JUA grant program awards \$500,000 annually, dependent upon appropriations from the excise tax revenue. JUA applicants must have a partnership between a school and a local agency, organization, or business, and the school must act as the agent for the funding. JUA grants help Arkansas schools adopt and implement shared policies and to form community partnerships to take full advantage of resources while increasing opportunities for physical activity. Since 2010, 161 grants have been awarded to 65 Arkansas school districts in 38 counties (see Figure 1, next page).<sup>5</sup>

### **Goals of the Arkansas Statewide JUA Grant**

The Arkansas JUA Grant Program has the following main goals:

- Enhance parent and community involvement and improved academic performance in the K–12 setting.
- Contribute to the development of healthier and better-prepared youth in institutions of higher education and the workforce.
- Contribute to the reduction of health care costs related to obesity (e.g., hypertension and diabetes).
- Contribute to a reduction in mortality and morbidity due to chronic disease by creating safe and accessible community spaces for physical activity.<sup>6</sup>

**Figure 1: Joint use agreements in Arkansas**



### STEPHENS ELEMENTARY SPOTLIGHT

Stephens Elementary (Stephens) is in the Little Rock School District and is located near the city's 12<sup>th</sup> Street Corridor. Stephens has an enrollment of 341 students in grades Pre-K through 5, with an average class size of 19 students. During the 2015-2016 school year, 32.6 percent of Stephens' students were either overweight or obese, less than the district rate of 38.9 percent and the statewide rate of 38.7 percent. Ninety-six percent of Stephens' students receive a free or reduced rate lunch, which is an indicator of low income status. This compares with a 74.9 percent free/reduced lunch rate for the district and a 61 percent rate statewide.

In 2016, Stephens received a JUA grant from the Arkansas Department of Education to build an outdoor gym to promote fitness and healthy living for students, parents, and the community. The Stephens Elementary JUA is a partnership with the Stephens Community Center and Little Rock Parks and Recreation. The school is adjacent to the community center. The JUA will facilitate a connection between the school and community through physical activity. The handicap accessible outdoor equipment will be available for students, parents and community members before, during and after school hours. There will be a gate connecting the school and community center to foster access between the buildings. School officials indicate that the equipment will benefit the school's physical education curriculum, recess, before- and after-school programs, community center senior adult activities, and community baseball and volleyball teams. The ground has been leveled, equipment has been delivered, and outdoor equipment is currently being installed.

## BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN COMMUNITY AND HEALTH

The Stephens staff envisions introducing students to the opportunity to develop lifelong physical activity habits. Parents and staff will be encouraged to use the equipment and to participate in fitness challenges promoting health and physical activity. The outdoor fitness center will offer convenient access with no membership required. Stephens' principal, Mr. Phillip Carlock, stated, "I would like for the community to know that the school plays an active role in promoting healthy living with students, families and stakeholders, and that we are putting our money and resources into supporting the health of the community."

**Figure 2: Stephens Elementary location near the 12th Street Corridor**

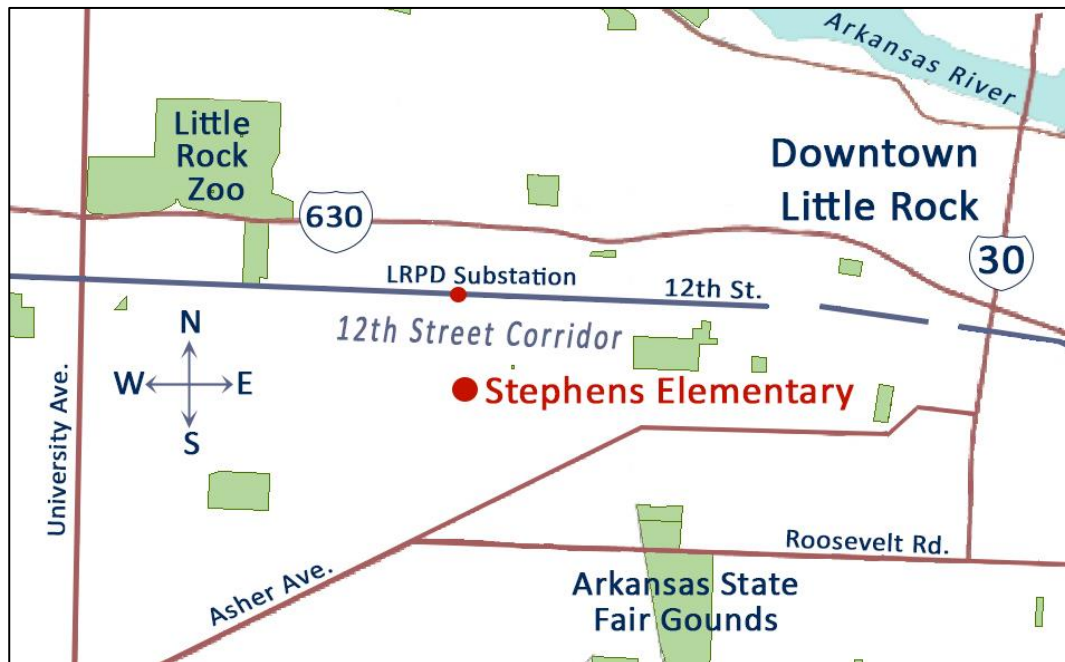


Figure 2 (above) depicts Stephens Elementary and its location in relation to the 12<sup>th</sup> Street Corridor, which is the focus area of the City of Little Rock's Invest Health initiative, funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Invest Health is aimed at transforming how leaders from midsize American cities work together to help low income communities thrive, with specific attention to community features that drive health such as access to safe and affordable housing, places to play and exercise, and quality jobs.

## REFERENCES

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