

Positive Policy and Practices: Concept, Context and Process

Part of the GP RED Series of Research Briefs for translational research – providing good information for public parks and recreation agency administrators.



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Executive Summary

Most public policies aim to restrict, prohibit, or otherwise serve as notice of punitive actions for those guests who violate their intent or mandate. These policies focus directly on those citizens who use public parks and recreation assets and/or affordances. Public park and recreation agencies are charged with serving the diverse needs of a community. As a public service these agencies must abide by established law, statute, ordinances. These public policies are often nested in language that aims to control behavior, protect property and provide safe places to play, recreate or enjoy leisure time. The challenge to agencies is that these policies require enforcement to insure safety and avoid litigation. Consequently agencies default to policies and practices that are viewed as punitive. The central issue is that approaching a breach of rule by expelling guests is counterproductive. This is especially true for children and youth who are the lifeblood of youth sports. Recent research indicates that dropout rates of 5-15 year old youth have increased significantly. Creating and sustaining brand loyal guests (especially children and youth) is not just essential to agency ledgers, it is critical to address public health issues such as obesity. Positive policy options represent a transformative process that may reverse the dropout trends.



Introduction

Most public policies aim to restrict, prohibit, or otherwise serve as notice of punitive actions for those guests¹ who violate their intent or mandate. These policies focus directly on those citizens who use public parks and recreation *assets*² and/or *affordances*³ (services and/or programs *afforded* to the public). Policies are the extension of public law governing the behavior of the public. They are crafted by the legal and political systems to “protect” the public from harm, avoid litigation, and reduce risk to the guest and public agency. The intent of these policies, many of which are longstanding, is to notify, or alert guests, that they will be punished for their violation. The negative nature of these policies is of concern to those who must enforce them, and guests who must comply. Policies that govern behavior of participants involved in publicly operated facilities are often vague (“No running on deck”), unenforceable (limited staff coverage), or ignored (posted speed limits). While adherence to public law is expected municipal laws vary by jurisdiction. While a law may be in place, and enforced in one venue, it may not be applicable to another. The guest is the principal agent in constructing the experience and is expected to be responsible, reasonable, and positive in their every action. Of paramount importance is our commitment to creating opportunities for all citizens to pursue well-being through leisure experiences. If our efforts to optimize guest experiences are tainted or perversely impacted by policies that inhibit, prohibit or otherwise limit the individual, how can we expect them to return? Become brand loyal? Or achieve well-being? This paper advances the premise that policy reformation is long overdue in the profession. Further, it states that the guest experience must be anchored in positive interactions resulting in sustained engagement, and optimal well-being.

Of paramount importance is our commitment to creating opportunities for all citizens to pursue well-being through leisure experiences.

The Mandate for Policy Reformation

There are a plethora of public laws on record in each and every community across the nation. Many of these laws have been on the record for decades. Some are revisions of existing law while others emerge as a reflection of shifting public opinion. Some laws are a reaction to events (e.g. 9/11, Sandy Hook school shootings, etc.). The bottom line is that public laws are constantly evolving^{4,5}. Park and recreation agency policies that are adopted to fulfill the requirements of law are often enacted to meet the letter of the law, not the service delivery expectations of the guest. Consequently, there are often gaps in their application, enforcement and effectiveness.

The primary mandate for policy reformation is nested in the premise that our public parks and recreation agencies were constituted to serve the public need and preserve precious resources. Our mission has always placed the guest at the forefront of our service efforts. Further, we have also accepted a principal role in preserving and protecting our public lands. In serving our public, we are challenged to create positive guest experiences for all who partake of our services. In the conduct of our services agency personnel must carry out their duties in a professional manner. Planning for future operations and directions are nested in a process that is the responsibility of these professionals. Public input into the planning process is expected. Yet unless the proposed projects, programs or fiscal requirements require a formal vote for approval, there is minimal engagement by citizens in the actual creation of laws, statutes, ordinances or codes that govern policy.

There are pockets of citizens who are not served, surveyed, or engaged in the process of lawmaking or policy formulation. As well, public agencies do not formally or regularly engage citizens in providing appraisal of services rendered. Creating and sustaining citizen involvement is essential to creating positive guest experiences. *Positivistic*⁴ experiences don't just happen they are the product of deliberate, intentional planning.

In sum, the mandate for change in public law and municipal policies is driven by the following premises: 1) unfettered citizen engagement in policy formulation, adoption and surveillance; and 2) transforming public park and recreation services through the adoption of *positivism* to increase utilization by the underserved, and those who we seek to be brand loyal customers over their life course.

Policy and the Healthy Community

Public park and recreation agencies are central to building and sustaining a healthy and active community⁵. Creating an activity friendly community is not just good for living, it is good for business, public health, and the civility of society. In the United States many community leaders, in concert with state and federal agencies, are engaged in rebuilding or redirecting their communities to assure that quality of life is prominent. *Healthy People 2020*⁶ provides a national platform for community planning to address health, environmental and civic issues that, in the long run, elevate the life quality of all. Active living that contributes to *healthism*⁷ is encouraged through events, tourism, etc. Each community must plan for the future to address lingering

issues of air quality, pollution, crowding, lifestyle related chronic illnesses, crime, safety, transportation, and *human agency*⁸. From this planning process should emerge laws, policies and practices that elevate positivistic underpinnings of a society in search of the common-good. The Healthy Communities Research Group (HCRG) recommends municipalities and their local healthy community planning teams engage in a comprehensive effort to plan for the future.⁹

Instrumental Basis of Public Policies

The establishment of public policies governing the behavior of citizens is noble and required in a litigious society. Yet the intent is often directed toward ends that are contradictory to the mission, vision, and goals of our public agencies. Public park and recreation agencies serve a wide spectrum of constituents ranging from toddlers to octogenarians. Laws that prohibit, limit or otherwise control the human experience, affect our ability to carry out the stated mission, vision and goals. Further, these policies assert that they are necessary for public safety, management of risk, and legal protection for the public agency. While there remains a necessity to protect the public agency and its guests from harm, current policies do not address the need for policies do not lead to positive behaviors, positive places, and well-being outcomes. Public parks and recreation assets and affordances are *public goods*¹⁰. As such, they are designed to positively affect the health and well-being of all citizens^{11,12,13}.

The current approach by public park and recreation agencies utilize policies that are aimed at controlling human behavior, threatening legal or restrictive actions, or other consequences (i.e.) revocation of membership, expulsion, etc. There is a clear need to understand why this policy approach may represent a serious threat to retaining “customers”, “guests”, “patrons”, and most importantly, our children and youth. Negative or punitive policies appear to establish lines of demarcation for our guests. While the public park and recreation agency is often not the source of policy, it is that agent which must enforce municipal code, law, etc. The central issue is that guests, and especially children and youth, are not engaged in policy formulation, implementation or ongoing surveillance of their application. Neither are their views of the pertinence or usefulness of the policies sought. In other words, the voice of the customer is not desired, heard, or utilized.

Public agencies such as parks and recreation are pivotal in creating and sustaining healthy communities.

Policies and the Guest Experience

In America, laws, regulations, ordinances, declarations, etc. establish what citizens can or cannot do¹⁴. The array of laws that govern the operations of public park and recreation agencies emanate from their governmental affiliation. As a special district, municipality, county, or state based organization, parks and recreation agencies must enforce the laws of the state in which they are located. Above all, these agencies must comply with federal law.

Policies at the municipal level are aimed at controlling citizen behavior. These policies are directed at preventing the following: aberrant behavior; property destruction; conducting activities not deemed safe; risks to public health, etc.

Public parks and recreation agencies have little control over what becomes law, yet they are required to enforce them through agency policy and practices. Given the nature of society today, enforcement is a challenge. This is especially true when the park and recreation agency’s mission is to contribute to the well-being of individuals and preserve the assets it manages.

In many municipal organizations the rules, ordinances, or laws emanate from litigation, repeated incidents, other ordinances of the municipality (e.g.) noise, allowable items in public places, etc., or regulatory statutes emanating from a supporting constituency^{15, 16, 17}. At the public agency level, policies aimed at maintaining a safe, environmentally sound, clean, and accessible area or facility are common. Other laws are aimed at controlling behaviors of individuals while on public grounds, facilities, or in programs sponsored by, or contracted to, an entity that serves a targeted group (e.g. youth sport leagues, municipal sport venues, and outdoor specialized facilities).

Theoretical Foundation for Positive Policies

A positive approach to municipal policy formulation, adoption and implementation is nested in the theories of positive psychology^{18,19,20}. Throughout modern history, psychology has focused the “abnormal” and the vagaries of mental illness. In the last two decades, there has been a radical shift in a group of psychologists who advanced the proposition that should be studied, embraced and applied to the human experience. Several minimal questions were posed to scholars. What factors contribute to well-being? When would one know if they were in a positive state of

mind? What impact on overall health would positivistic thinking and acting make? Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2009:5) describe positive psychology as follows:

The field of positive psychology at the subjective level is about valued subjective experiences: well-being, contentment, and satisfaction (in the past); hope and optimism for the future (for our future); and flow and happiness (in the present). At the individual level, it is about positive individual traits: the capacity for love and vocation, courage, interpersonal skill, aesthetic sensibility, perseverance, forgiveness, originality, future mindedness, spirituality, high talent, and wisdom. At the group level, it is about the civic virtues and the institutions that move individuals toward better citizenship: responsibility, nurturance, altruism, civility, moderation, tolerance, and a work ethic.²²

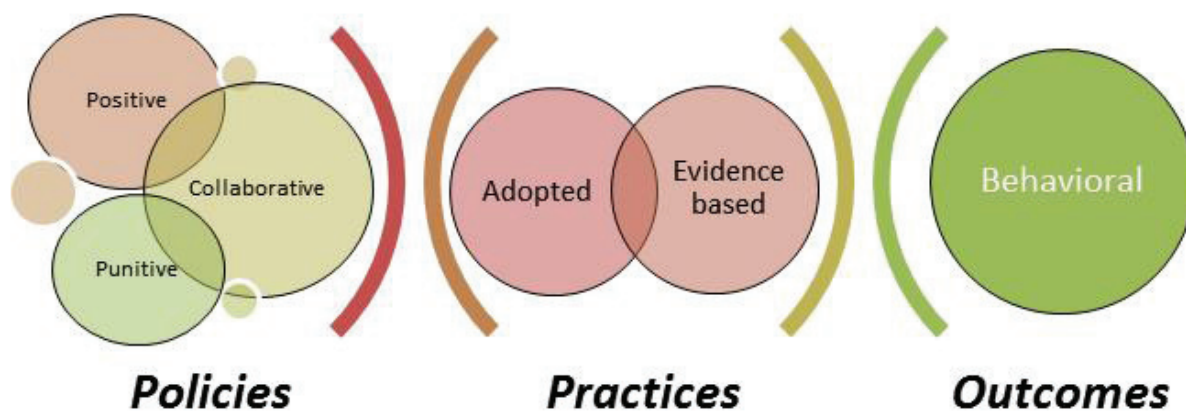
This approach focuses on enlisting diverse representatives of the community who can serve as leaders in developing “brand loyal” guests versus one-time shoppers. All children, youth, adults, and seniors who reside in a community, or service area, are potential brand loyal guests. As such, they should be accorded a positive experience each time they are engaged with the agency assets and affordances or public agencies. Creating and sustaining an environment in which staff interactions with customers are *positivistic*²³ is then of paramount importance. Policies that guide agency staff in the execution of their assigned duties should be anchored in evidence based practices. This advances the premise that the practices of staff are clearly supported by evidence that they work, are sound, and do not breach

existing regulations, policies or laws. Once the practices are proven to affect the desired outcome, they should be monitored, recorded, analyzed and reported regularly.

Positive Policy and Evidence Based Practices

Positive policies and evidence-based practices represent a structure that can reshape the guest experience. *Figure 1* illustrates the flow of policy reformation that leads to the eventual quantification of behavioral outcomes. In our current economic climate, each agency must demonstrate that their services directly or indirectly contribute to the improvement in or reduction of established outcome markers agreed upon in advance. More importantly, parks and recreation agencies are more frequently being queried about claims that their services prevent chronic illness, disease, and reduce health care costs. These claims require evidence that data were collected and prove their assertions. Further, these data should prove that investment in public parks and recreation yields an economic benefit other than land values. Measuring behavioral outcomes in guests who are actively engaged in managing their level of physical activity, nutrition habits, and social engagement is therefore essential. These are three indicators used by health care providers and employers to prevent lifestyle related chronic illness. Each is vital to not only adults, but our children and youth. Developing and sustaining an active, balanced lifestyle over the life course is critical factor in reducing lifestyle related chronic illnesses.

Figure 1. Policies shape practices yielding outcomes



Positive Policy

A positive policy approach is anchored in the premise that public policy is for the greater good of all citizens. This approach to policy formulation, adoption, and implementation differs from past approaches as presented in *Table 1*.

Table 1. Current vs. Positive Policy Priorities

Current Policy Priorities	Positive Policy Priorities
Protecting public safety	Protecting individual rights & responsibilities
Protection of property	Owning responsibility for public property
Maintaining law & order	Assuring positive human interactions
Control of user behavior	Engaging users in self-regulatory behavior
Limit or restrict activities	Mutual rules of behavior while in activities
Punishing negative behaviors	Affirming positive behaviors
Ad hoc use of policies in practice	Consistent use of policies in practice
Variability in practices	Evidence based practices

The current approach to formulating, adopting, and enforcing public policy has been in place for over a century. Yet the process is unique in that it limits citizen input from the outset. While there are often token opportunities to speak before a city council, governing board, or other bodies, it is rare that the voice of the customer is engaged in the process unless it involves the increase of taxes. The positive policy approach requires upfront

and ongoing citizen engagement. It differs from current policy approaches as it postulates that customers should be at the center of owning and assisting in managing the experience. This suggests that if we desire to create positive experiences that sustain customers over the long term, we must make a paradigm shift in how we manage our daily affordances and assets. Table 2 provides a glimpse of current policy approaches.

Table 2. Current Policy Formulation, Adoption and Enforcement

Policy Formulation	Policy Adoption	Policy Enforcement
Federal level	Public law (code/statute)	Supreme court; federal courts
State level	State law (code/statute)	State, county, municipal courts
Municipal code or ordinance	Elected officials	Law enforcement; agency staff
Advanced by elected officials	Elected officials, agency staff	Law enforcement; agency staff
Modified by citizens input	Vote in annual public elections	Law enforcement; agency staff
Formal/public meetings	Vote in city council or committee	Law enforcement; agency staff

The positivistic approach to policy formulation, adoption, and enforcement differs markedly from current approaches. While policy in the current mode is “top down”, the positivistic approach engages the guest (including youth, young adults, and economically and ethnically diverse citizens) in processes that invite their direct input. The positivistic approach seeks to have policy embedded in the guest experience at venues, programs, services, and places

operated by public park and recreation agencies. It seeks to achieve the elements of positive psychology as explained by Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi²².

Positive Policy: The process

Creating and maintaining positive policies in an agency will require a commitment to change. In addressing the critical issue of childhood obesity, management, staff and end users (parents and their 10-14 year old children) will need to collaborate in establishing new policies and practices. That effort should be anchored in policies that afford each child the opportunity to participate in a welcoming, safe, personalized, and accommodating environment. Staff (full, part-time and seasonal) and volunteers should be formally trained to insure they understand, comprehend and are able to execute the positive policy methods. Full implementation will require monitoring, performance ratings, data analysis and the adoption of quality improvement measures.

The process of transformation from policies and practices of the past may be challenging as longstanding behaviors are difficult to redirect. Elected municipal officials, legal counsel and agency administrators may not choose to retreat from current laws, ordinances, and statutes. However, there is a duty to examine each law, ordinance, and policy carefully to insure the following: 1) safety of guests; 2) risks of guest engagement are known, acknowledged and managed; 3) rights and responsibilities of guests are clearly stated; and 4) continual oversight and review of policies are evident. Table 3 provides a framework for the process of creating positive policies at the municipal level.

Table 3. Positive Policy Process

Assurances	Formulation	Adoption	Implementation	Monitoring
Consistent with mission/vision statements	Community active living coalition (ALC) presents strategic plan for healthy community	Elected officials with the concurrence of the citizen referendum	ALC & multiple local agencies, services, businesses	ALC members ongoing surveillance, with regular input by parent/youth advisory councils
Reasonable & achievable in designated time period	including a process for formal citizen involvement	Approval by ALC members, schools, PTA, youth serving agencies, youth councils, etc.	ALC oversight with regular reports to members & citizens	
Focused on measurable health outcomes, behavior benchmarks	Reformation of current law, ordinance, code, policy Revocation of other policies	Adoption of policies & practices by ALC member agencies	Data collected to document changes in behavior, health status, well-being of citizens	Employs advanced management software tools to collect & analyze data
Annual results on status of youth made public	Annual impact analysis of policies & practices on youth health	Revision, revocation or adoption of law, code, ordinance, or agency policy	ALC members & public agencies report on findings of policy efficacy	Summary analysis of annual data to determine changes in policy and/or practices

Among the numerous issues facing communities are those related to public health. Over the past several decades our children and youth have been impacted by multiple factors affecting their health and well-being. Obesity is one of the most challenging public health issues. Over the lifespan it is a precursor to chronic illnesses such as diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, musculoskeletal deterioration, respiratory diseases, etc. Our nation has long known of the effects of obesity, yet numerous efforts at the federal, state and local levels have failed to significantly reduce the incidence and prevalence of obesity related chronic illnesses. National organizations including the National Recreation and Park Association have advanced strategies, programs, campaigns and media efforts to reverse the trends. To date these efforts have not been universally or scientifically successful. Longstanding efforts by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDCP) have also included specific actions to address the obesity epidemic of the last several decades²³.

One of the seminal issues in constructing strategies to combat obesity is policy reformation. This is critically important at the local, municipal level. Public park and recreation agencies across the nation should be considered a catalytic agent for change. In this role park and recreation agencies could form healthy community coalitions comprised of representatives from school systems, health care, law enforcement, youth services, etc. The obesity issue is not the sole property of public health...it is a public health issue of all citizens. The local coalition efforts require collaboration across local government, business, civic groups and the public at large. Ultimately it is expected that the local collaborative process as outlined in the GPRED Healthy Communities Initiative will lead to outcomes based actions. Comprehensive, inclusive planning, policy reformation, and evidence based practices are requisites to behavioral change and the reduction of obesity in America.

Our children and youth represent the future of our nation. Their well-being and sustained engagement in society is of paramount importance^{24, 25, 26, 27}. Yet only tacit attention is given to their civic engagement through meaningful roles^{28, 29, 30}. The last three decades (1980's to present) have resulted in near pandemic rises in obesity^{31, 32}. With nearly a third of our nation's children and youth being overweight, obese or morbidly obese, there is a critical need to engage them in the process of achieving well-being. The fact of the matter is that we cannot pay this healthcare bill in the near term nor down the road. In addition to the obesity pandemic, our children and youth face other challenges such as acts of violence, drugs and alcohol addiction, homelessness, fracturing of the traditional family, and more^{34, 35}. While it is impossible to address all of these issues at the local level, the obesity issue seems seminal to the mission, vision and goals of our public

park and recreation agencies. Creating activity friendly communities³⁶, safe schools^{37, 38}, and collaborative efforts across public agencies, health care, business and other organizations represent positive policy actions.

Employing positive policy strategies to combat the obesity issue is a collaborative process for addressing this public health challenges. The following ten steps are recommended to prevent long term chronic health conditions as a result of being overweight, obese or morbidly obese:

1. Examine current policies and practices that may inhibit or prohibit optimal engagement of the target youth group (overweight, obese, morbidly obese). The Healthy Communities Research Group (HCRG)³⁹ uses a nominal group process based on the multi-attribute utility technique (MAUT)^{40, 41} to obtain ratings of key factors and their indicators. These data are tabulated by the session facilitators and reflected the priorities of a diverse panel of community agency representatives (i.e.) public schools, health care, law enforcement, youth services, and the park and recreation agency staff. A similar effort can be conducted with representative youth and their parents to assure the factors and their indicators are similarly prioritized.
2. Collect youth data regarding nutrition, physical activity and social interaction to establish a baseline for future comparison once policies have been adopted and applied. The Youth Activity and Nutrition Survey (YANS)⁴² used by GP RED is an online survey instrument for middle school youth that provides valid and reliable data for policy and planning purposes.
3. Draft an internal agency positive policy related to youth social interaction and engagement. These factors appear vital to developing and sustaining a nutritional regimen and physical activity. Parallel policies related to access to fresh foods, community gardens, etc. will support the positive policy platform.
4. Articulate how and when the positive policies will be implemented. Agency management may choose to use selected test sites that are closest to the target population of 10-14 year old overweight, obese, or morbidly obese youth. Trained staff (including volunteers, health care professionals, youth, parents, etc.) will be essential to operationalize policies and adhere to established practices.
5. Secure approval of the draft policies from key stakeholders (e.g.) In Liberty, Missouri a coalition of community agencies serves as the coordinating entity for advancing policy recommendations to its

members, citizen advocacy groups, municipal agency heads, elected officials, municipal attorney/s, parks and recreation staff, etc.

6. Train staff in techniques of applying evidence based practices. This would require selected staff and management of the park and recreation agency, to develop a set of best practices that create a welcoming, positive, and nurturing environment at the selected sites, programs, or activities. In addition, the staff can craft positive cards, photos, or web based materials to further validate their application of positive agency practices.
7. Modify signage and other messaging media to reflect a positive, supportive and safe environment. In this step it is advised to seek legal counsel to insure signage revisions do not violate local, state or federal law. It is suggested that an inventory of all signage be undertaken to catalog what messages are being directed at guests, their intent, options for the “message”, and what positive options might replace or offset the current message.
8. Customize programs, activities, and services to optimize parent and child/youth perception of the potential for success, acceptance (regardless of their physical capacity), and optimal personal capacity building (physical, mental, emotional and spiritual).
9. Maintain a diverse enrollment of children/youth (e.g.) normal weight as well as overweight to avoid undue attention to children who are overweight and avoid bullying or hazing actions. Parent and youth role models can be engaged to maintain compliant, cooperative, positive, and tolerant behaviors for all participants.
10. Offer an array of opportunities (e.g. sport, cultural, social, civic, environmental, and indoor/outdoor) to ensure that there are options for these children/youth to select activities for exploration and immersion versus an early exit from competitive sports. The intent is to retain the individual over the life course as an active, engaged guest to insure their well-being and optimal capacity.

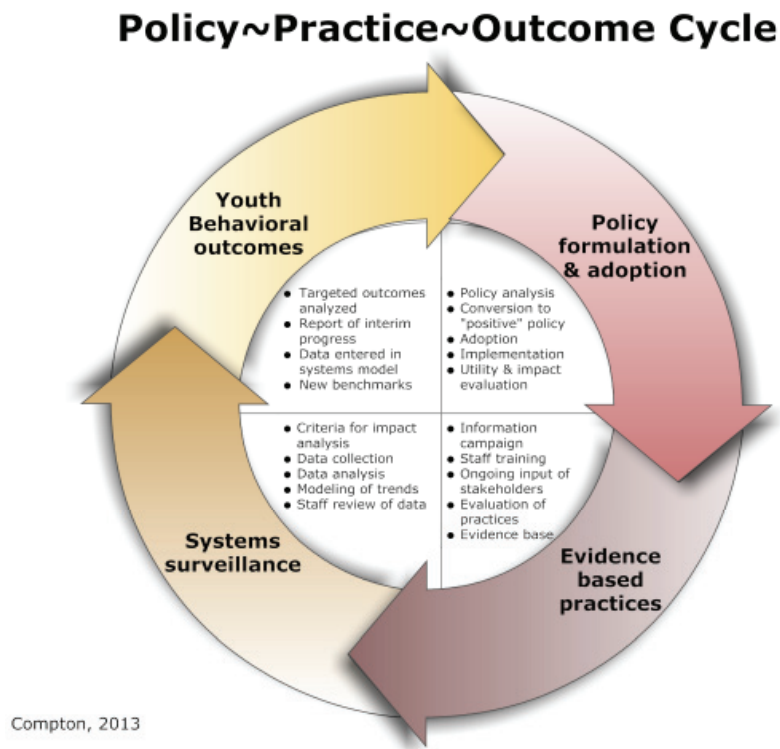
The Positive Policy Cycle

The process of transforming current policies from their punitive, legal base to one in which there is a positive environment, professional practices, and a sustainable customer base is achievable. The aim is to create an array of experiences in which the guest is at the center of our actions. Public parks and recreation agencies should seek to increase human capacity, wellness, and elevate the richness of the actual experience. Nurturing and sustaining our customer base begins with the first enrollment in a program, lesson, etc. is of paramount importance.

The challenge today for many public park and recreation agencies is that our children and youth are dropping out of youth sport programs at an alarming rate⁴³. Some agencies report that by the age of 10 years, 30-70% of their youth are no longer engaged in programs, leagues, or competitive sport programs⁴⁴. Competitive sport has its place, but it is not the only avenue to exercising, playing, social interaction, or having fun. There are numerous constraints that youth face while seeking to participate in sports. Public park and recreation agencies should consider a paradigm shift to cultivate and maintain our children in the offerings that lead to physical, social, intellectual, emotional, and overall health capacity. *Figure 2* provides an illustration of the cycle of actions if the agency regularly monitors its affordances and assets. The policy, practice, and outcome cycle is an ongoing process of surveillance and data collection. It serves as the basis for continuous quality improvement (CQI). This cycle assumes that all staff, and their respective units, have established outcome measures aimed at meeting the needs of their guests.

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Figure 2.
Policy, Practice and
Outcome Cycle



Example of a Positive Policy Approach

To illustrate the use of positive policies the public park and recreation agency might explore the following:

Problem – Current municipal, state, and federal policies prohibit the use improper language, aggressive behavior toward one another, bullying, or hazing (directly or in cyberspace). *The key issue is that the current language in law, ordinance, or statute spell out the consequences for violations, and these are almost always punitive.*

Question- Is it possible to employ positive policies that augment or replace current punitive ones?

Setting – As an example, assume that a recreation, fitness, and aquatic center were to create a positive policy approach to the question posed above. What would change in the setting to nurture and validate acceptable behavior? The answer is providing a climate of “welcoming,” “membership,” and “belonging.” Many centers operate without a deliberate intention to create a positive customer experience. Transforming the setting, its social climate, signage, oral communication, and staff presence, creates a positive environment where each child/youth is valorized, not vilified. A positive, welcoming, and accommodating environment is a key to increasing guest ratings, sustaining their participation over time, and meeting the needs of all – not a select few.

Policy declarations – Establish a set of positive policies that declare that the facility or space in which the guests are engaged is a “positive environment.” Some public schools have done this with success. Rather than citing all of the things that one cannot do, the policy focuses on those acts that are positive toward another (e.g.) kindness, supporting statements, recognition of effort, etc. These policies establish evidence based practices that staff and guests abide by during their interactions with one another.

Professional staff practices – All agency staff (including volunteers) are trained in methods, protocols, and practices which support the adopted positive policies. Formal training, with competence measures for each practice, leads to staff behaviors that validate the guest experience. All staff (supervisor, receptionist, janitor, seasonal workers, etc.) are trained in situational scenarios, and performs duties consistent with the adopted positive policies.

Guest behavioral practices- Our goal is to create an environment in which our guests become our best advertisers. In fact, guests become the source for validating or affirming positive guest behaviors. Using techniques for shaping positive behaviors, staff can designate selected guests to serve as role models. In this role the guest is enlisted to seek out positive behaviors of other guests and affirm these acts of kindness, sportsmanship, etc. In this strategy, the number of role models can grow rapidly and create a genuinely positive environment. This may be especially important in highly competitive activities.

An example of a simple strategy for creating a “welcoming” environment is to train staff to welcome each person upon entry or exit with a “*Good morning,*” or, “*Thanks for coming today.*” An even stronger level of customer recognition is staff having direct eye contact with each customer. If staff members recognize individuals by their first name, this elevates the interaction to a level of high importance and validation. Knowing your customer and providing a salutation each time they visit your facility is a key to creating and sustaining “brand loyalty.” Of paramount importance is the continual improvement of staff performance by obtaining feedback from others (supervisors, line staff, and customers) via observation, evaluation, and self-appraisal.

Customer (Parent/guardian, youth, children) engagement-

One of the most essential philosophical underpinnings of the positive policy approach is to declare who “owns” the experience. While at your facilities, or enrolled in programs, lessons, contracted or sponsored activities, all *guests are expected to be full partners in shaping policy, monitoring their own behavior as well as that of others, and insuring a positive resolution or outcome in encounters.* This is achieved by consistent, positive affirmation of behaviors of staff and guests. Through positivistic policy and practice there is greater probability of respect for difference, civility, inclusion, and the well-being of all.

Youth engagement and agency- One critical strategy for addressing the dropout rates of children and youth is to accelerate and sustain youth engagement in public policy matters. There is ample evidence that this policy strategy yields significant results^{45, 46}. Meaningful engagement of youth through the formation of advisory councils, panels, marketing teams, positive patrols, etc., provide vehicles for their voices to be heard in matters of policy, practice and planning. The concept of creating human agency is nested in the belief that, “*Greater agency involves higher adaptability because individuals as well as societies, agency means the power to act purposely to their advantage*”⁴⁷. When children and youth are emboldened with agency, they are free to explore all possible avenues to achievement, citizenship, and well-being.

Behavioral outcomes – It is vital that positive policies lead to improved staff performance. Yet the ultimate test is whether there is a significant increase/decrease in the following among the target group of 10-14 year old youth who are overweight, obese, or morbidly obese:

1. Increases among target youth population in:
 - a. Time spent in physical activity
 - b. Balance in caloric intake
 - c. Intrinsic motivation
 - d. Number of friends

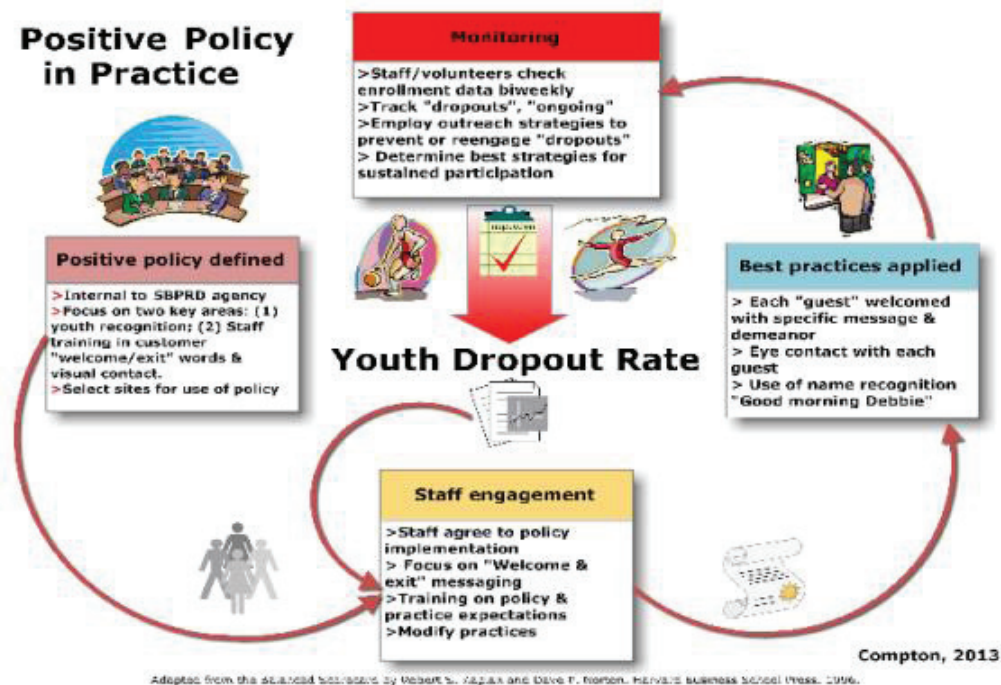
- e. Membership in clubs, organizations, etc.
- f. Sustained participation in activities, clubs, causes, etc.
- g. Self-efficacy
2. Decreases among target youth population in:
 - a. Time spent in sedentary activities (e.g.) television watching, video games,
 - b. Intake of fast foods, high fat content foods, etc.
 - c. Body mass index
 - d. Weight
 - e. Solitary time
3. Sustained engagement over time
 - a. Reduced dropout rates at ages 5-9, 10-14 years
 - b. Options to engage in non-consequential activities including sport, music, performing arts, outdoor (climbing, hiking, photography, etc.), creative arts, special interest clubs, etc.
 - c. Identification of barriers to participation (e.g.) cost, skill level, transportation, access to special venues, social-psychological factors (low self-esteem, etc.)
 - d. Human agency and civic engagement

Our nation’s public park and recreation agencies serve millions of children and youth, yet there is a paucity of empirical evidence of the impact of our services on behavioral health, well-being, and capacity to carry on a productive life. Public agencies document their physical assets (property, venues, etc.) yet there is little evidence of the documentation of behavioral outcomes as a result of engaging in their services. In our opinion, behavioral outcomes should be a factor in determining a Level of Service (LOS) or composite value of the services rendered by the local agency.^{48, 49} In order to determine the effect of assets and affordances offered by these public agencies, it appears that they will need to utilize computer modeling, systems analytics and other methods of documenting impact on the health and well-being of its citizens. Proving that parks and recreation contribute to the health and well-being of communities is long overdue.

If we are to make a difference in the lives of our future guests, then we must reposition our agencies. The first step is policy reformation. *Figure 3* illustrates positive policy in practice. The staggering drop out of youth by age 10 years of age is the target. In this illustration, policy is defined by the agency in collaboration with staff, advisory groups, citizens and officials from the municipality. The intent is to reverse the current practice of token engagement of citizens, especially youth. The positive policy focuses on valorizing each individual, not treating them as just another person through the turnstile. Other evidence-based practices are employed to authenticate our interest in you (the youth guest), and engage them in shaping the experiences they seek to increase their well-being, capacity to physically, emotionally and intellectually prepare

for life elevated. To address the increasing dropout rate of children, agency staff should employ a systems approach to monitoring, shaping, engaging and assessing youth participation. *Figure 3* illustrates this process which starts with the definition and adoption of positive policy.

Figure 3. Positive Policy in Practice



Summary Statement

In summary, positive policy approaches are in place in many sectors of human experience, yet few public park and recreation agencies have ventured into the arena. The literature is replete with evidence that positive approaches to behavior change, social engagement, and professional practices have an effect upon guest experiences. These are evidenced by sustained guest engagement, improved well-being and lifestyle modification. Our current system of service delivery appears to utilize negative and punitive actions to those who breach their policies. The current system magnifies the problem for those who violate rules, regulations, etc. Revamping policies, practices, and training to focus on measurable behavior outcomes are not just good for business, they are essential to nurturing and sustaining a healthy population.

Over the past decade our nation has forged ahead to address public health issues. Much progress has been made, but much work remains. Cities like South Bend, Indiana and Liberty, Missouri have embraced the challenge and are fully engaged in addressing the challenges of

youth in their communities^{50, 51, 52, 53}. Our nation's schools have adopted policies that enlist youth in cultivating a positive learning setting⁵⁴. Radical possibilities for change in youth services are forthcoming in social work and youth development⁵⁵. When youth are provided higher levels of agency and civic engagement in forming public policy, they assume greater responsibility for the outcomes^{56, 57, 58, 59}. Physical activity among our youth is linked to the nation's public health⁶⁰. Research points to clear environmental and policy determinants of physical activity^{61, 62, 63}. Our public park and recreation agencies are critical agents of change that can lead to well-being for all citizens. Policies of our past are asynchronous with the current times. The aim of our effort must be to optimize well-being among all citizens. This will require a paradigm shift in our planning, deployment of assets and affordances. It will also require fundamental rethinking of existing policies and practices employed to address our citizen's well-being and social capital^{64, 65, 66}. If we act in a positive and informed context, "Quality of life will be higher than it would otherwise would have been, because policy makers and citizens will make better decisions based on more complete information"⁶⁷.

References

1. Use of the term “guest” is preferred instead of customer, patron, citizen, etc. Literature in the hospitality industry focuses on the “guest experience”. Inherent to the guest experience is the expectation that they will have a safe, rewarding, pleasurable time which results in the expectations being met or exceeded and their frequent return.
2. The term “assets” refers to the tangible *physical* and/ or *natural* properties of the agency. These may include: buildings, specialized facilities (i.e.) ice rinks, swimming pools, etc. or natural areas such as parks, waterways, etc.
3. The term “affordances” refers to those organized activities, lessons, leagues, services, or other activities offered, sponsored or co-sponsored by the agency.
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