

# Provincial Sport Policy in Ontario: Trends, Issues, and Ways Forward

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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In Canada, the amateur sport sector operates under a multi-level governance system in which authority is shared between the federal and provincial/territorial governments. Sport participation, however, is facilitated by various organizations at the community-level. The *Canadian Sport Policy* provides direction for ensuring sport's positive impact on individuals and communities.<sup>1</sup> Yet through two iterations of the national policy, goals for increasing participation have not been met.<sup>3</sup> Despite investments and political will, increasing sport participation remains an elusive and poorly understood policy objective. Regional differences and local implementation challenges persist and are shaped by divergent approaches to governing sport across the provinces and territories. Therefore, it is crucial to examine provincial/territorial approaches to sport policy to understand their strategies and outcomes.

As the sport system in Ontario anticipates an updated national sport policy and grapples with ongoing issues related to equity, safe sport, and the impacts of COVID-19, which continue to shape public discourse and policy development at all levels, it is timely to consider the province's role in the sport sector. Furthermore, with the recent establishment of a new ministry dedicated specifically to sport, building a strong sport system in Ontario is an urgent and timely concern for both practitioners and policy makers.

Since 2021, our research team has examined the role of provincial policy related to sport in Ontario. In June 2024, this work culminated in a series of discussions about policy development and implementation in the province, via interviews and a policy workshop hosted at the University of Toronto. In this report, we summarize the insights from these discussions.

Our analysis revealed four overarching findings across the workshop and interview data. Findings consistently underscored challenging experiences with sport policy that hindered their organization's ability to carry out their mandates and reach their goals and objectives. The four key findings are presented below.

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

The lack of a strategy/vision for Ontario's sport sector and jurisdictional tensions between sport organizations, school boards, and municipalities negatively impact successful sport development. No action plan also means no clear metrics for evaluation. Further, without a unified voice, amateur sport efforts are fragmented, which hinders the overall development of sport in the province. The recent establishment of a new Ministry of Sport presents a timely and crucial opportunity to harness sport resources and solidify the role of sport within the government and the province. Based on the findings above, we offer three recommendations as well as specific action items for provincial policymakers and sport organizations to enhance sport policy and development in Ontario:

**Recommendation #1: Create a Provincial Amateur Sport Plan or Framework**

**Recommendation #2: Build a Collective Voice for Amateur Sport**

**Recommendation #3: Leverage Provincial Sport Expertise, Resources, and Capacity**

Provincial sport policy in Ontario involves complex and dynamic challenges, presenting a variety of intersectional issues for key actors within the amateur sport system. As the newly established leader in the sport sector in Ontario, the Ministry of Sport is in a position to improve the sport sector, notably through changes to how sport organizations are supported. Effective and evidence-based sport policy in Ontario is crucial for enhancing sport participation opportunities within the amateur sport system and understanding the social, cultural, health, and economic outcomes of sport for Ontarians.



# INTRODUCTION

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In Canada, the amateur sport sector is a shared responsibility between federal and provincial/territorial governments, within a multi-level governance system. However, sport participation opportunities are developed and delivered at the community level by a variety of public, commercial, and non-profit community sport organizations (CSOs). The ways that sport-related policy objectives are understood, pursued, and supported vary across Canada according to "their relevance to jurisdictional mandate and priorities."<sup>1</sup> For example, some jurisdictions may have policies focused on mass participation, while others focus on attracting sport events that generate economic growth. Thus, regional factors affect how sport policy is made and implemented in different parts of the country.

The *Canadian Sport Policy* (CSP) sets the direction for all governments and organizations to ensure that sport positively contributes to individuals, communities, and the country more broadly.<sup>2</sup> However, policy goals related to increasing sport participation are often not met.<sup>3</sup> The federal government also recognized that increasing participation will require concerted efforts to promote participation (at all levels of the sport system) in specific underrepresented groups, including women and girls; Indigenous Peoples; persons with disabilities; newcomers to Canada; socioeconomically disadvantaged Canadians; Canadians living in rural, remote, and isolated regions; sexual and gender minority Canadians; and older adults.<sup>4</sup> As such, sport participation is a complex and intersectional issue. Despite investments and political will, how to increase sport participation remains an elusive and poorly understood policy objective. Therefore, examining provincial/territorial approaches to sport policy is crucial in the current socio-political context.

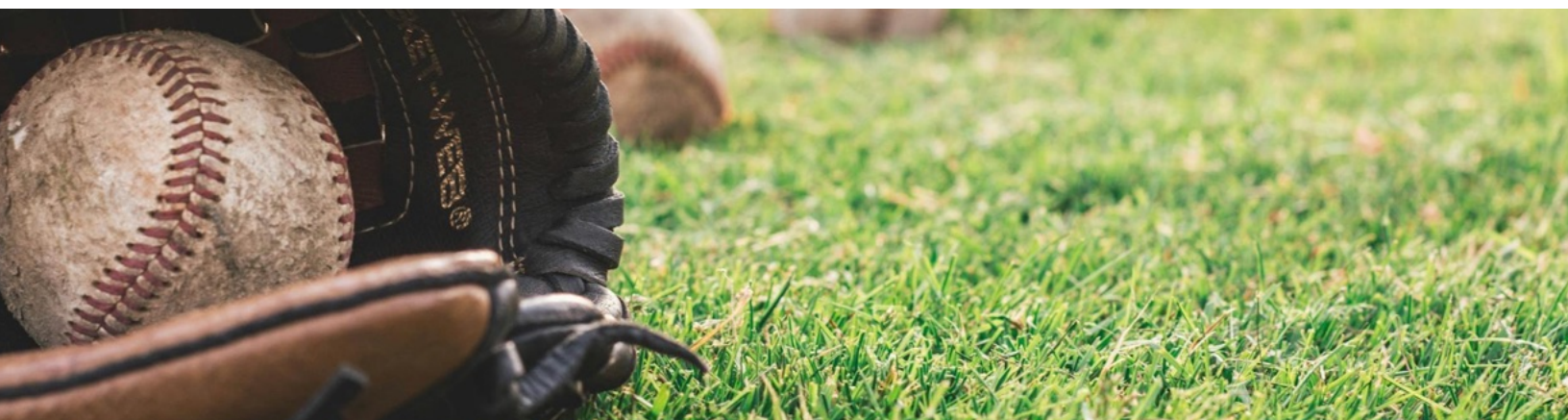
While the CSP<sup>5</sup> called on national, provincial, and territorial bodies to work collaboratively to increase sport participation, it remains unclear how sport policy is implemented by various actors within the sport system. Further, in Ontario, sport is an urgent policy issue for policymakers and practitioners due to rising public health concerns.<sup>6</sup> Effective sport policy can reduce physical inactivity, obesity, and mental health issues, while fostering community cohesion, reducing crime rates, and improving overall quality of life.<sup>7</sup> Sport is therefore a social, health, and political issue for the province.

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As the Canadian sport system prepares for an updated national policy, several issues are at the forefront of public discourse related to sport, including the social and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic,<sup>8</sup> opportunities for equity-deserving groups,<sup>9</sup> safe sport,<sup>10</sup> gender equity in Canadian sport,<sup>11</sup> the ways climate change continues to affect sports,<sup>12</sup> and the role of sport in Indigenous communities.<sup>13</sup>

Since 2021, our research team has worked to understand how policy flows through the sport system and to examine how provincial and/or jurisdictional differences impact sport policy implementation in Ontario. We understand policy implementation as the process of translating policy goals and objectives into practical actions to achieve intended outcomes.<sup>14</sup> As sport in Canada is governed through a multi-level governance framework,<sup>15</sup> accountability and efficiency of governance processes require critical assessment of these actors and their impacts on the development of sport participation opportunities.

We began by systematically examining the provincial policy context of sport participation in Ontario and then built on this analysis by engaging actors in various provincial sport organizations (PSOs), community sport organizations (CSOs), and multi-sport organizations (MSOs) in discussions of policy development and implementation. This report summarizes these insights and identifies implications of provincial policy trends and developments in Ontario. We also highlight current issues and priorities for the future of sport in the province and then present key recommendations for Ontario's provincial government and sport organizations to enhance sport policy and development in Ontario.





# THE ONTARIO CONTEXT

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Ontario is Canada's most populous and second-largest province, with an estimated population of close to 16 million in April 2024.<sup>16</sup> Immigration fuels its growth, making it one of Canada's most culturally diverse provinces. However, Ontario faces challenges such as an aging population, which strains the labour force and provincial services like healthcare. As one of the wealthiest provinces, Ontario holds a significant share of Canada's natural resources and has the most advanced and diverse industrial economy.<sup>17</sup> Despite a relatively high median household income, regional and demographic disparities exist. For example, residents of Northern Ontario and rural areas face higher unemployment, lower median incomes, and poorer health outcomes compared to those in Southern Ontario.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, the out-migration of the working-age population, declining fertility rates, and lower immigration levels have resulted in an older age distribution in Northern Ontario.<sup>19</sup> This demographic shift impacts social and economic conditions, leading to increased healthcare costs, labour shortages, and challenges to the region's economic viability as the population ages. These regional and demographic differences complicate policy development and implementation due to varied and sometimes conflicting needs across the population and economic sectors.

## ***Ontario's Sport Landscape***

There are approximately 7,400 ministry recognized CSOs affiliated with PSOs and MSOs in Ontario, serving nearly 3.1 million members.<sup>20</sup> The provincial government contributes roughly \$8.2 million (CAD) annually in core operating funds to eligible sport organizations to support programs for developing athletes, coaches, and officials. In 2021, 65 PSOs were eligible for this funding.<sup>21</sup> The province also invests in various initiatives and programs such as enhancing sport infrastructure, supporting COVID recovery, promoting physical activity, recreational sport programming, and facilitating athlete development. A bilateral agreement between the Federal Government and the Provincial Government is also in place to support projects that strengthen physical literacy, provide sport opportunities for persons from under-represented and/or marginalized populations, strengthen Indigenous Capacity and Leadership for the Provincial/Territorial Aboriginal Sport Bodies (PTASBs), and increase culturally relevant sport programming for Indigenous children and youth at the community level.<sup>22</sup>



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Sport is also important to Ontarians. A study conducted in 2021 demonstrated that 65% of Ontarians have positive perceptions of sport, with 30% participating weekly and just over 50% participating monthly.<sup>23</sup> Although the COVID-19 pandemic affected sport participation, 65% of Ontarians maintained their overall interest in sports. The top barriers to participation are accessibility, safety, and cost. Further, a 2023 report on youth sports in Ontario revealed a 17% decline in access compared to the previous year, with social isolation and affordability being the most significant barriers.<sup>24</sup> In line with regional disparities in the province, the research also indicated variations in participation rates across different regions. Overall, Ontario's sport context features a robust network of organizations serving a diverse population, supported by some provincial funding. Despite steady interest in sports, regional participation disparities and recent declines in youth sports access due to social isolation, affordability, and safety concerns are critical sport policy issues for the province.



## Ontario Sport Policy Developments and Ministry Changes

Prior to 1996, Ontario did not issue sport policy directives. It relied on federal policies, such as the *National Recreation Statement* and the *Community Recreation Policy Statement*, to guide its involvement in sport.<sup>25</sup> Under the Ministry of Citizenship, Culture and Recreation, the 1996 release of *A Strategy for Amateur Sport in Ontario* marked the province's first official sport policy. Table 1 (below) provides a chronological outline of provincial sport policy from 1996 to 2024.

**Table 1. Ontario Provincial Sport Legislation and Policies 1996 - 2024<sup>i</sup>**

Year	Legislation or Policy
1996	<i>A Strategy For Amateur Sport in Ontario</i>
2003	<i>Ontario Sport Action Plan</i>
2004	<i>Community Use of Schools Program</i> <sup>ii</sup>
2005	<i>Active2010: Ontario's Sport and Physical Activity Strategy</i>
2005	<i>Canada - Ontario - Bilateral Agreement - Sport for More Program</i>
2013	<i>Healthy Kids Strategy</i> <sup>iii</sup>
2015	<i>GameON</i>
2016	<i>Sport Recognition Policy</i> <sup>iv</sup>
2017	<i>Advancing Opportunities for Women and Girls in Sport: Ontario's Action Plan</i> <sup>v</sup>
2018	<i>Rowan's Law</i>
2024	<i>Community Sport and Recreation Infrastructure Fund</i> <sup>vi</sup>

Source: Compiled from various sources (see References for details).<sup>26</sup>

[i] This list includes a selection of programs related to policies/legislation that were frequently discussed during data collection, however it is not exhaustive.

[ii] Although not a sport policy, the Community Use of School Program policy is important to note as it affects the availability of school facilities for hosting sports activities.

[iii] Although not a sport policy, the Healthy Kids Strategy is important to note as it promotes increased physical activity, including through sport.

[iv] Game ON commitment.

[v] Game ON commitment.

[vi] Part of the Ontario 2024 Budget: Building a Better Ontario.

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The location of sport within provincial administrations changed several times since 1996. Starting in 1999, sport was associated with tourism and culture. In June 2005, the Liberal Government transferred responsibility for sport to the newly created provincial Ministry of Health Promotion, and then added the word sport explicitly to the title in 2010. In 2011, the responsibility for sport shifted again when sport was added to the portfolio of the Ministry of Tourism, Culture, and Sport and continued to be associated with ministries responsible for tourism and culture until 2024. Table 2 (below) provides a chronological outline of ministries and ministers responsible for sport since 1995.



**Table 2. Provincial Sport Ministers and Ministries 1995 - 2024**

Years Active	Minister	Ministry	Political Party
1995 - 1997	Marilyn Mushinski	Citizenship, Culture and Recreation	Conservative
1997 - 1999	Isabel Basset	Citizenship, Culture and Recreation	Conservative
1999 - 2001	Helen Johns	Tourism	Conservative
2001 - 2002	Tim Hudak	Culture, Tourism and Recreation	Conservative
2002	Cam Jackson	Tourism and Recreation	Conservative
2002 - 2003	Frank Klees	Tourism and Recreation	Conservative
2003	Brian Coburn	Tourism and Recreation	Conservative
2003 - 2005	Jim Bradley	Tourism and Recreation	Liberal
2005 - 2010	Jim Bradley	Health Promotion	Liberal
2011	Jim Bradley	Health Promotion and Sport	Liberal
2011 - 2014	Michael Chan	Tourism, Culture and Sport	Liberal
2014 - 2016	Michael Coteau	Tourism, Culture and Sport	Liberal
2016 - 2018	Eleanor McMahon	Tourism, Culture and Sport	Liberal
2018	Daiene Vernille	Tourism, Culture and Sport	Liberal
2018	Sylvia Jones	Tourism, Culture and Sport	Conservative
2018 - 2019	Michael Tibollo	Tourism, Culture and Sport	Conservative
2019	Lisa Macleod	Tourism, Culture and Sport	Conservative
2019 - 2022	Lisa Macleod	Heritage, Sport, Tourism and Culture Industries	Conservative
2022	Neil Lumsden	Tourism, Culture and Sport	Conservative
2024	Neil Lumsden	Sport	Conservative

Source: Compiled from various sources (see References for details).<sup>26, 27</sup>

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On June 6th, 2024, Premier Doug Ford shuffled the cabinet and appointed the former Minister of Tourism, Culture and Sport as the minister of a newly created Ministry of Sport<sup>28</sup> marking the first time that Ontario has held a ministry solely responsible for sport. In a social media statement, Neil Lumsden announced, “Sport has the ability to unite our communities, boost our economy, and teach the next generation of leaders. I am thrilled that Premier Ford has established a new ministry that is dedicated to sport in Ontario – and has asked me to lead it. We will continue our work to make sport safe and more accessible in Ontario, attract top-tier events to our province and build new local facilities for families to stay active through our Community Sport and Infrastructure Fund.”<sup>29</sup>

This recent announcement comes at a crucial juncture for the sport sector in Ontario. It highlights the growing recognition of sport's vital role in enhancing public health and fostering community engagement. The creation of the ministry underscores the urgent need for comprehensive sport policy reform. Our report highlights critical findings from our research and outlines recommendations directly relevant to this new ministry's mandate. The data and analyses presented are crucial for informing effective policy decisions and ensuring that the Ministry of Sport supports effective sport governance practices in Ontario. The timely implementation of these recommendations is vital for fostering a healthy, active, and inclusive sport system. In light of the new ministry's formation, the evidence-based insights and recommendations outlined in this report are timely and critical for both policymakers and practitioners in Ontario.





# METHODOLOGY

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In 2024, we completed our three-year research project examining sport policy development and implementation in Ontario. This research included a policy analysis conducted in 2021-2022<sup>30</sup> and then interviews and a policy workshop conducted in the spring of 2024. In the first phase we analyzed documents related to the policy and decision-making processes of the Government of Ontario from 1995 onward. These findings informed the interviews and workshop discussions, during which we ultimately sought to understand how provincial policies impacted sport policy in Ontario. We conducted nine semi-structured interviews with key informants between April and June 2024 to gain insights into the development and implementation of sport policy in Ontario. These informants included actors from a variety of organizations within the provincial sport system in Ontario.

Subsequently, we hosted a workshop at the Centre for Sport Policy Studies at the University of Toronto on May 7th, 2024. The workshop was held in a hybrid format, with thirteen participants in person and twelve participants who joined virtually. Participants included representatives from PSOs, CSOs, MSOs, coaching development and support organizations, sport advocacy organizations, charitable sport organizations, community sport development organizations, and academics. The participants engaged in critical discussions to identify implications of policy trends and developments for sport organizations, as well as current issues and priorities for the future. In total, 24 organizations involved in amateur sport in Ontario were represented, and thirty-four individuals participated in the interviews and workshop. While by no means representative of all demographics and regions of the province, the discussions were robust and included a variety of organizations (as outlined above).<sup>i</sup>

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[i] We acknowledge that our study did not include organizations specifically working with Indigenous communities. Future research should aim to incorporate these important perspectives to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the implementation of sport policy in Ontario.

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In the following section, we summarize the findings from this data in two sections. First, we identify four key findings developed from the data collected. Each finding is substantiated with examples of data. Subsequently, we present two distinct sets of recommendations: one for the Provincial Government and another for sport organizations in Ontario. These sections were developed by the research team and then reviewed by several workshop participants to enhance the rigour and validity of this report.





## KEY FINDINGS

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Our analysis revealed four overarching findings across the workshop and interview data. Findings across both groups consistently underscored challenging experiences with sport policy that hindered their organization's ability to carry out their mandates and reach their goals and objectives. The four key findings are:

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





## KEY FINDING #1 - A lack of strategy and vision at the provincial level has led to confusion, policy misalignment, and disorganization within the sector.

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Workshop participants and interviewees were asked to describe policies related to sport in Ontario, including the specific policies/pieces of legislation that impact their organizational mandates. Instead, nearly all participants described the **lack** of an overarching sport strategy/policy or vision at the provincial level as having the most impact on their work. This absence of strategic direction has led to confusion, ineffective policy implementation, and disorganization within the sector. No action plan also means no clear metrics for evaluation.

*“Since 2018, everybody does their own thing. When the Conservative Government came into power, **GameOn**, which was the name of the existing sport plan, ended. There's been no plan. You're writing up annual proposals for funding allocations, and you're literally playing in the dark because you're not totally sure.”*



There was also consensus that previous sports policies, which provided a clear vision and strategy, helped organizations more effectively set and achieve their goals and objectives.

*“**The Ontario Sport Plan** and **The Action Plan for Women and Girls**, they were very helpful in terms of communicating to the sector what the government's priorities are and how resources should be applied in order to align with that broader policy objective. Even **Rowan's Law** under the previous government was a powerful direction on a policy issue. Whereas under the current government, I would say that there's been an absence of communication with the sector in terms of priorities for the sport and rec sector.”*

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The common sentiment felt by many was that because there is no provincial sport plan, there is no alignment with the federal sport policy to ensure consistency and optimize resources for more effective delivery of sport programs at the provincial level. Further, for this alignment to be practical, the policy should be recognized and prioritized within the provincial ministry responsible for sport.

*“It would be really helpful to have a sport plan and a recreation plan for the province that flows from the common vision of the renewed **Canadian Sport Policy**. It would be helpful to have a critical look at the current funding levels and whether they are realistic in order for those policies to be adopted. But unless it's part of the **Ministry Mandate Letter**, that priority is really difficult to get traction.”*

The lack of an overarching provincial sport plan limits sport organizations' ability to address current issues and achieve organizational policy directives such as affordability and safe sport. Without a unified strategy there is no consistency in policy and efforts become fragmented, leading to varied standards, inefficient resource use, and gaps in safeguarding measures. For example, the **Sport Recognition Policy** states that PSOs and MSOs must have certain policies in place to support safe sport environments; however it does not state best practices or regulatory requirements to create a safer and more inclusive sport environment.

*“I'll give you an example, which is a big priority right now, and that's abuse in sport, what we call safe sport. So, we all know it's a priority, but the government hasn't explicitly said “What about safe sport?” What actions, what initiatives, what behaviours, what policies and so when provincial sport organizations are submitting their funding applications, they're all choosing and picking different potential safe sport initiatives and my view is that that's not the best way to go because if you've got everybody rolling in different directions, I mean how do you ever monitor outcomes? How do you develop key performance indicators like if you're talking about culture change, do you not need like some momentum behind initiatives to affect that?... A practical policy that says if a community does XY and Z, you will reap these benefits.”*

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Participants also felt a lack of clearly articulated provincial sport policy contributes to capacity issues within sport organizations. Participants noted that there is insufficient funding, direction, or support from the province to help the organizations address increasing responsibilities and align with their respective national sport organizations (NSOs).

*“The funding envelope for sports has not changed for over 25 years. I think I am not alone at this to say that to operate and run sport as compared to the past is more complex, more demanding, and harder to pull off.”*

*“Most of us last year received about a 25 per cent reduction in funding from the province, simply because they were adding more sports to fund without increasing the amount of money just at the time when they were putting in a whole bunch of new requirements for the PSOs to have additional policies in place. It was a massive amount of work trying to monitor that without extra funding whatsoever.”*



The absence of a unified provincial policy strains resources, causing inefficiencies and duplications that prevent sport organizations from effectively aligning with national affiliates and addressing current issues.

*“I spent the last 13 years with an NSO and shifted to a PSO in September, and I was in a bit of a shock, to be honest, in the lack of sophistication of our structure. I am surprised at how far behind we are on policies and areas like safe sport. I think it stems from no mission, no vision, and no independent organization serving sport specifically in the province. I am no longer frustrated with Sport Canada.”*

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There was consensus that an overarching sport plan would need to address the complex and diverse intersections of sport. It was noted that *“Policy has to support the most marginalized.”* Participants felt that a provincial policy or strategy should focus on those who continue to be under-represented in sport, including people with disabilities, lower income families, Indigenous Peoples, immigrants and new Canadians, rural citizens, and girls, women, and non-binary genders.

*“The biggest takeaway for me was a question asked in our group of if this one policy would work with so many diverse groups, Indigenous plans and all the other pieces.... it really got me thinking.”*

*“If you look at just Ontario, it’s a very diverse province and so, you know, equity, diversity and inclusion is pretty important.”*



## KEY FINDING #2 - The absence of a unified voice in amateur sport results in fragmented efforts and hinders the development of sport in the province.

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Many participants emphasized that the lack of a stable, collective voice in amateur sport leads to fragmented efforts and hinders the development in sport, noting that Ontario is the only province in Canada without a stable, provincially funded umbrella organization or advocacy body. They agreed that a central advocacy organization could unify actors in the provincial sport system, secure funding, build capacity within sport organizations, promote best practices, enhance athlete development, and ensure cohesive and streamlined policy implementation from the national and provincial levels.

*“In Ontario we're really good at talking about the individual things we all do, but it needs to come together for us to acknowledge that sport is a system. Sport BC says we are collectively working towards this goal. They all have a mandate. They all have someone who helps them drive those things, and it is in the best interests of the people of British Columbia first and foremost, right?”*



Various participants referred to when The Sport Alliance of Ontario, later rebranded as the Provincial Sport Organization Council and Sport4Ontario, filled this role and had dedicated core funding to operate. The Ontario Sport Network has recently emerged to fill this gap; however, they do not receive stable funding to operate and therefore have a limited scope of work.

*“The things we were able to do collectively together as a sector was so much better... Back then when Sport4Ontario was strong, we got together monthly and those conversations just happened and those synergies happened collectively doing things together.”*

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Participants highlighted that the Ontario amateur sport sector was one of the last in Canada to emerge from COVID. While the province focused on opening things up for high-performance athletes and professional sports as soon as possible, sport organizations felt little attention was paid to the grassroots sport system. An advocacy body for sport could have provided the government with comprehensive insights on community sport programming and the role it could play in supporting community health, social cohesion, and economic recovery post-COVID.

*“As a major grassroots sport organization, we were not even mentioned in Ontario’s white paper on economic and social recovery from COVID.”*

*“Community sport and amateur sport was a fraction of what they were investing in for us to come out of COVID. And that is why Ontario was the slowest and the most ineffectual body coming out of COVID. It took us forever because there was no singular voice.”*

Without a lead agency or collective voice for sport, organizations struggle to achieve their objectives and end goals due to poor coordination, inconsistent standards, and fragmented efforts. This lack of cohesion undermines the effectiveness of sport programs and leads to missed resource-sharing opportunities and comprehensive sector development.

*“It’s really important for us to be strategic....we have to be more vocal, we have to advocate, we have to connect with our stakeholders more often, not less often, so we understand what the issues are, and the province can hear from our sector.”*



**After the workshop and interviews, participants overwhelmingly expressed interest in being part of forming a central sport advocacy body in Ontario.**

### KEY FINDING #3 - The role and location of sport within the government influences resources, support, and the expectations of sport in Ontario.

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Participants noted how sport policy priorities reflect the agenda of the governing party in power. Additionally, the location of sport in successive provincial administrations had implications for sport's expected role and the resources and support available to sport organizations.

Many agreed that understanding the ruling political party's platform is crucial for reaching desired organizational outcomes and requesting resources, because it allows organizations to align their proposals with the party's priorities and values.

*"When I make my pitches to government, which I am always doing, you just have to know what that government stands for. This government's about return on investment. So, making sure return on investment is your key message."*

Because the location of sport within provincial government administrations and the ministers overseeing the portfolio has changed several times, many participants perceived these changes as the province viewing sport as a low policy priority.

*"I mean, there's five different ministers since 2018, or even just before there's been multiple different movements of the sport portfolio to different or new ministries that have either continued or been renamed or constant shuffling of the deck. Which means one thing. It's not that important, right? Because if it keeps getting moved around, it's not a bonafide ministry on its own; therefore, it's just gonna fall into somebody else's desk. That means we're not a priority."*



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Having sport combined with other ministries that historically prioritized economic benefit for the province was also identified as influencing funding priorities, resource availability, and decision making.

*"I feel like sport gets lost in that ministry we're trying to talk about ... Tourism is 100% the most dominant one, because tourism in Ontario drives economic results."*



Participants also expressed that the Ontario Government may be more receptive to financing initiatives if a case is made identifying their economic benefits.

*"There was this report<sup>i</sup> about the money that sport brings for tourism. So whoa, let's just support it! They made the case, and now all of a sudden it's there."*

The low priority of sport has translated into limited resources and support for the portfolio to help organizations achieve their goals and objectives.

*"The ministry consultants for sport have a very different role now. They play very hands-off now. Unfortunately, with so many changes for PSOs, it's not been a good relationship because they are hands-off. They're not helpful when they don't even come and meet with you in person."*

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[i] The Mills Report - Government of Canada. (1998). Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage, Sub-committee on the Study of Sport in Canada. Sport in Canada: Everybody's business. Leadership, partnership and accountability. Canadian Heritage.



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In addition to the influence of the governing party and the ministry responsible for sport on how organizations pursue their desired outcomes, there was frequent mention of the lack of inter-ministerial collaboration. This collaboration is essential, as sport can promote positive outcomes across various sectors.

*“Sport interweaves across so many sectors....health, mental health, education, employee preparedness, social inclusion....but it's funny how it's treated. Sport, being an intervention to support other government priorities, has such great potential. And also, we had some good conversation around how the demographics of Ontario and Canada are changing and huge reliance on the immigration policies that exist in this country. The shifting demographics are going to require organizations to be more aware of where participants are coming from.”*

*“There are benefits to sport and recreation that for some reason haven't resonated with any of the parties, in terms of strategic thinking about how sport and rec can be used as vehicles for social cohesion, and health benefits.....it's got to be ingrained in physical literacy and has to be valued as an all of government approach. Because it impacts multiple ministries.”*

How sport is understood within the ministry responsible for it has implications for the distribution of resources and support. The recent announcement that there is now a ministry in the province dedicated specifically to sport is a timely development in the sector. <sup>i</sup>



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[i] This announcement occurred on June 6th, 2024, after data were collected at the policy workshop.

## KEY FINDING #4 - Jurisdictional tensions between sport organizations, municipalities, and school boards have negatively affected sport programming and facility access.

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Many participants shared that jurisdictional tensions between sport organizations, municipalities, and school boards negatively impact successful sport development. Sport programming and facility access were cited as common areas of concern.

Overall, the participants acknowledged that there is a lack of alignment with the school sport system and the amateur sport system. Although students make up a large part of participants in sports, the sentiment was that the school boards do not see themselves as stakeholders in the sport system. This misalignment creates inconsistencies in the quality and standards of sport programs, limiting the development pathways for young athletes, and leading to the inefficient use of resources.

*“We need alignment with our high school system. Like you look at any functioning country that is good at any sport, there's alignment between high schools as part of the pathway for an athlete right now.....we don't have that.”*

Further, with the elimination of mandatory physical education for grades 10-12 in the early 1990s and the reduction in extra-curricular sport opportunities at schools, there was consensus that this pressures CSOs to fill this gap. The importance of the education system in delivering quality sport programming was noted.

*“Education is a gold mine to build and value physical literacy in terms of an important credential within the Phys Ed Department versus leaving it ad hoc with community organizations.”*



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Broadly, participants expressed concerns about available play space for sport across the province. They are particularly concerned about the **Community Use of Schools Program** administered by the Ministry of Education. Although numerous schools have facilities available to host sport, jurisdictional tensions and lack of funding restrict organizations' ability to access this program to deliver sport programs.

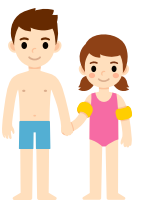
*“The community use of school piece, it really impacts a lot of organizations on the ground. It operates differently in each board. We serve about 1000 participants and we work within the Toronto District School Board, which has been very difficult, but we pay \$100,000 a year in facility fees. We are entirely a charity.”*

There are also challenges of funding and navigating the program through different school board jurisdictions.

*“So out here in Halton region, it is three times the cost to rent a field hockey from the Catholic Board than it is to rent one from the Public Board, which to me makes no sense because they're all operated under the same ministry.”*

Jurisdictional tensions with municipalities were also mentioned as having implications for executing sport policies. Municipalities, as the closest level of government providing facilities and grassroots sport opportunities, are experiencing their own fiscal, capacity, and policy challenges constraining their abilities. Further, no two municipalities use the same tools and services to implement these services. This results in challenges in aligning programming, incorporating best practices and utilizing facilities effectively. There was an overall desire to collaborate with municipalities to create more community sport opportunities.

*“Municipalities are running programs, which is good. But they're running non-sanctioned programs. There's no linkage between our systems and how do we bridge that gap? I don't know.”*



## DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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Our analysis highlights the complex and dynamic implications of provincial sport policy in Ontario and identifies necessary improvements to better address the needs of actors in the amateur sport sector. Four overarching findings were presented, summarizing a variety of intersectional issues faced by sport organizations within the Ontario sport system.

Actors involved in amateur sport in Ontario clearly recognize the benefits of an overarching approach to provincial sport policy that aligns not only with the federal sport policy, but across provincial ministries and with municipalities and school boards in Ontario. Further, the advantages of a stable collective voice for sport in the province were acknowledged. This was well reflected by the sentiment expressed by participants about the need for a unified framework for decision making, leadership, and guidance. While many of the challenges identified in this report require a higher level of systems coordination, they provide a baseline for actions that various provincial sport actors can take to improve the sport system for Ontarians. Improvement will necessarily involve efforts from actors across the entire sport system, as input will be critical to develop solutions that are sport-participant centered and sector-driven.

Based on the workshop and interview findings, clear recommendations were identified and grouped into three key topic areas. These recommendations and action items for the provincial government and sport organizations are presented below.



## RECOMMENDATION #1:

# Create a Provincial Amateur Sport Plan or Framework

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The **lack of a strategy/vision for Ontario's sport sector and jurisdictional tensions between sport organizations, school boards, and municipalities negatively impact sport development.** Creating an overarching provincial sport plan or framework that includes harmonization between school boards and municipalities would offer a unified framework for decision making and ensure consistent standards and practices across the province. It would also provide leadership and guidance, helping organizations align their efforts with broader provincial and federal goals and enhance collaboration, capacity building, and resource sharing. Importantly, the development of such a framework would reduce inefficiencies, and improve effectiveness of the sport sector in delivering social, health, cultural, and economic outcomes for Ontarians. Key considerations in this plan should include alignment between sport organizations, schools and municipalities, grassroots participation, high performance sport, inclusivity, reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, and recognition of the positive outcomes of sport in other priority areas, such as health and education, all within a commitment to providing safe sporting environments. Key performance indicators should reflect these critical components of the ministry's mandate.

### Actions for the Provincial Government

- Lead the creation of a sector-informed, provincial sport plan that would consider sport's social, cultural, health, and economic benefits, promoting overall well-being and personal development. Include perspectives from the entire sport system: PSOs, CSOs, MSOs, municipalities, coaching organizations, sport official organizations, school boards, equity-owned groups, parents, and sport participants themselves.
- Commit to Indigenous-settler reconciliation by working in partnership with Indigenous communities and organizations to ensure Indigenous Peoples' perspectives are included in the approach.

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## **Actions for the Provincial Government (Continued)**

- Work with organizations that support community-level, recreational, and high-performance sport opportunities, such as Parks and Recreation Ontario (PRO), the Community Sport Councils Ontario (CSCO), and the Canadian Sport Institute Ontario (CSIO), to leverage resources, expertise, and a network of professionals dedicated to enhancing recreational and high-performance sport opportunities.
- Ensure dedicated funding and support for a comprehensive implementation and evaluation strategy. Develop measurable and time-bound outcome measures and key performance indicators. This will enable effective development of sport policy, continuous monitoring, and assessment of outcomes, ensuring alignment with organizational goals of sport organizations, and facilitating ongoing improvements based on evidence-based feedback.
- Align the plan with existing and emerging strategies at the national (Canadian Sport Policy, Safe Sport Strategy in Canada), provincial (Community Use of School), and municipal levels (Recreation Master Plans) to harmonize approaches to cross-jurisdictional issues.

## **Actions for Provincial Sport Organizations**

- Commit to capturing participation rates and data to inform the plan's priorities and evaluation efforts.
- Engage actors in the sport system by involving athletes, coaches, parents, officials, community members, and others in consultations to gather diverse perspectives and ensure the plan addresses their needs.
- Promote public awareness of the social, cultural, health and economic benefits of sport and lobby for support for the plan. Where relevant, develop partnerships and learn from allied organizations who can support the development of positive outcomes through sport.

## RECOMMENDATION #2: Build a Collective Voice for Amateur Sport

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**Without a unified voice, amateur sport efforts become fragmented, which hinders the overall development of sport in the province.** Creating a stable lead agency/organization for amateur sport in Ontario would serve as a centralized voice and advocate for sport development to address the needs of Ontarians. This agency would streamline the coordination and delivery of sport programs, ensuring consistency and quality across the province.

### Actions for the Provincial Government

- Reinvest in an organization to represent the interests of the sport sector and act as an intermediary between the government and sport organizations. Ontario remains the only province in Canada without a dedicated agency or organization to develop and support amateur sport. Provide early and ongoing funding to establish and maintain such an organization, potentially by revitalizing former entities like The Sport Alliance of Ontario, which was later rebranded as the Provincial Sport Organization Council and Sport4Ontario. While the Ontario Sport Network (OSN) has recently emerged to address this gap, it currently does not have sufficient capacity to support the sector broadly.
- Mandate broad engagement of actors including with equity-owned groups and organizations in all regions of the province to gather input, build consensus, and foster a sense of ownership and commitment to the agency/organization.
- Work with Indigenous communities and organizations to ensure meaningful representation of Indigenous Peoples and communities in the agency/organization.



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## Actions for Provincial Sport Organizations

- Form a strategic alliance with actors in the amateur sport system and allied organizations to present a united front, support collective goals, and advocate for support from the province.
- Leverage existing sport advocacy organizations like the Ontario Sport Network (OSN) to develop a community-driven proposal for a lead agency/organization for amateur sport. The Ontario Government may be more likely to provide funding if it arises from a community-driven proposal rather than a government-led initiative.
- Commit to learning from similar agencies/organizations in other provinces and to continually improving through evaluation and improvement. Flexibility and nimble organizing practices will be crucial to tailoring the model to Ontario's needs.





## RECOMMENDATION #3:

# Leverage Provincial Sport Expertise, Resources, and Capacity

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Ontario boasts a robust network of organizations with extensive expertise in the amateur sport sector, placing them in a strong position to tackle **all critical issues** highlighted in this report. The recent establishment of a new Ministry of Sport presents a timely and crucial opportunity to harness these resources and **solidify the role of sport within the government and the province**. By leveraging this established capacity, Ontario can enhance inter-ministerial collaboration, optimize sport policy, and promote positive outcomes across various sectors, thereby ensuring a more cohesive and effective sport system that benefits all communities within the province.

### Actions for the Provincial Government

- Establish the new Ministry of Sport as a durable entity explicitly dedicated to the development and support of amateur sport. Allocate dedicated and sustainable funding that reflects the sector's volunteer-driven nature and changing dynamics, ensuring the availability of sustained resources to support the needs and contributions of volunteers, and the organizations that support them, in fostering amateur sports.
- In the mandate of the new Ministry, identify and focus on the diverse benefits of sport for social, cultural, health, and economic well-being. Emphasize promoting health and well-being, fostering community engagement, and enhancing the overall quality of life for Ontarians through sport. The mandate should provide clear guidelines and objectives to ensure that these benefits are prioritized and integrated into all aspects of the ministry's policies and programs and evaluated as outcomes of policy.
- Appoint experienced and knowledgeable leaders and staff to the Ministry of Sport who are experts in sport management and policy implementation.
- Conduct public consultations, engage with communities, and consult academic experts to build support and gather input on the Ministry's priorities and programs.

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## Actions for the Provincial Government (Continued)

- Develop inter-ministerial partnerships with the Ministries of Health and Education to align sport programs with health and education.

## Actions for Provincial Sport Organizations

- Publicly support the establishment of the Ministry and highlight its potential benefits to the amateur sport system and the community.
- Collectively work to change the narrative around sport, ensuring that the public and the new Ministry of Sport recognize its value in promoting social, cultural, health, and economic well-being.
- Utilize partnerships with the private sector and research organizations to lead the development of a reporting process that documents the social, cultural, health, and economic benefits of sport and the return on investment in the sector, using evidence-based data and testimonials. This report will be useful to advocate for appropriate support and funding.
- Draw upon the expertise of nonprofits and academic organizations to provide data, research, and insights on sport participation, trends, and challenges to inform the Ministry's strategic planning and decision making.





## CONCLUSION

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In this report, we have highlighted the realities of sport policy development and implementation in Ontario. Clearly, provincial sport policy involves complex and dynamic challenges, presenting various intersectional issues for key actors within the amateur sport system.

As a newly established leadership mechanism in Ontario, the Ministry of Sport is in a position to dramatically improve the amateur sport sector. These improvements will involve changes to how sport organizations are supported in order to enhance how sport participation opportunities are delivered and evaluated in the province. These improvements can only be achieved through collaborative efforts between public and private sector actors. In this report, we have provided recommendations developed directly from several of these invested parties, in order to guide preliminary efforts to reform and improve Ontario's sport system.



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