

# Physical Educators and School Counselors Collaborating to Foster Successful Inclusion of Students with Disabilities

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## Abstract

*This article explains the impact federal legislation has on educating students with disabilities, the changing roles of physical educators and school counselors relative to educating students with disabilities, and collaborative approaches pertaining to how physical educators and school counselors can collaboratively foster successful inclusion of students with disabilities in physical education. Given the information and collaborative approaches provided within this article, physical educators and school counselors should be able to collaboratively foster successful inclusion of students with disabilities in physical education.*

Within the U.S. public school setting, over the past decade, there has been a significant increase in the number of students with disabilities included in the general education context (Sciarra, 2004). In particular, more so than any other curricular, physical education has served as the context whereas a majority of students with disabilities have been included (Block, 2007). However, within the physical education context, there exist limited qualified personnel to support physical educators as a means to foster successful inclusion of students with disabilities (Block, 2007; Block & Rizzo, 1995). Although school counselors do not provide direct services to students with disabilities within physical education contexts; however, such professionals can serve as support for physical educators relative to fostering successful inclusion of

students with disabilities. Therefore, the purposes of this article are to: 1) explain the impact federal legislation has on educating students with disabilities, 2) the changing roles of physical educators and school counselors relative to educating students with disabilities, and 3) collaborative approaches pertaining to how physical educators and school counselors could collaborate to foster successful inclusion of students with disabilities in physical education.

## Legislative Impact on Educating Students with Disabilities

Since the passing and implementation of P.L. 94-142 – The Education for all Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) in 1975, federal legislation has continuously evolved, significantly impacting the educating of students with disabilities in public schools in the U.S. Initially, one of the primary mandates of P.L. 94-142 was for students with disabilities to receive a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE) (i.e., with the least amount of social isolation from his/her same chronological-age peers without disabilities) (Jansma & French, 1994; Lerner, 2000). However, more recent legislation (e.g., The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 – P.L. 108-446; The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA] of 1990 – P.L. 101-476 and The Reauthorization of IDEA of 1997 – P.L. 105-17) has placed emphasis on professionals such as physical educators and school counselors who are direct service providers collaborating to foster successful

inclusion of students with disabilities (Block, 2007; Lerner, 2000; Studer & Quigney, 2003; Webb, 1999).

As a result of such legislative implementations, physical educators and school counselors, who are considered direct service providers to students with disabilities, have seen their roles and responsibilities change over the years (Block, 2007; Frye, 2005; Greer, Greer, & Woody, 1995; Hardin, 2005; Lockhart, 2003; Milsom, 2002). For instance, no longer are physical educators solely confined to addressing issues pertaining to safety, developmentally appropriate activities, and/or optimizing instructional time, but they must now as a result of various legislative mandates address issues pertaining to advocacy for students with disabilities, collaborating with paraprofessionals, and/or serving on Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams that requires them to collaborate with other professionals (in particular, school counselors) within their respective schools (Block, 2007). Along the same lines, no longer are school counselors primarily required to facilitate the growth and development of students without disabilities, but through various legislative mandates and professional counseling position statements, school counselors are now required to render their services to students with and without disabilities as a means to foster their successful inclusion (Scarborough & Deck, 1998; Studer & Quigney, 2003).

### **Changing Roles of Physical Educators and Students with Disabilities**

Due to the increased number of students with disabilities included into physical education contexts over the past decade, physical educators' roles have changed over the years as a means to provide quality instruction to both students with and without disabilities (Block, 2007; Sherrill, 1998). Given the significance of physical education, and the associated perceived benefits for students (in

particular, students with disabilities), physical education was the only curricular area identified within the definition of special education in the landmark federal legislation of P.L. 94-142 (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA] Amendments of 1997, P.L. 105-17, 20 U.S.C. 1400 et seq. [25] Federal Register, August 23, 1977). In particular, within IDEA, physical education has been defined as "The development of physical and motor fitness, fundamental motor skills and patterns, and skills in aquatics, dance, and individual and group games and sports (including intramural and lifetime sports)" (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA] Amendments of 1997, P.L. 105-17, 20 U.S.C. 1400 et seq. [25] Federal Register, August 23, 1977, p. 42480).

Prior to the implementation of various legislative mandates regarding appropriately educating students with disabilities in physical education contexts, traditional roles of physical educators involved the planning of developmentally appropriate movement activities across areas identified within IDEA's definition of physical education to accommodate the needs of typical developing students (i.e., students without disabilities) (National Association for Sport and Physical Education [NASPE], 1992). However, Block and Burke (1999) noted that as a means for physical educators to adjust to their changing roles, and to comply with various legislative mandates, physical educators must now begin to plan developmentally appropriate movement activities (as defined within IDEA) to address the needs of students with disabilities. Thus, physical educators should collaborate with other paraprofessionals to inquire about the nature of a disability; discuss curriculum, equipment and/or instructional modifications, as well as advocacy strategies as a means to foster successful inclusion of students with disabilities in their physical education classes (Block, 2007; Block & Burke, 1999).

### **Changing Roles of School Counselors and Student with Disabilities**

Similar to physical educators, school counselors have seen their roles change over the past decade as it relates to working with students with disabilities (Frye, 2005; Greer, Greer, & Woody, 1995; Lockhart, 2003; Milson, 2002). For instance, traditional roles of school counselors involved them primarily addressing the needs of students without disabilities, through the implementation of comprehensive, standard-based developmental school counseling programs, which pertained to them working with students who: 1) were considered at risk of dropping out of school, 2) were involved in gangs, 3) displayed delinquent behaviors, and/or 4) engaged in substance abuse (Dunn, Wood, & Baker, 2002). However, as a result of the implementation of various legislative mandates and the issuance of professional counseling organizations' position statements pertaining to appropriately educating students with disabilities, school counselors' roles have changed to ensure that the needs of students with and without disabilities are met (Frye, 2005; Wittmer & Clark, 2007).

In 1993 and 2003, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) issued position statements identifying the following new roles to be addressed by school counselors involving students with disabilities: 1) advocacy, 2) developing transition plans, 3) developing behavior modifications, 4) counseling parents, 5) making referrals to specialists, 6) improving students with disabilities self-esteem, 7) serving on their respective schools' multidisciplinary teams, 8) teaching social skills to students with disabilities, and 9) serving as consultants to parents and school staff (American School Counselor Association, 1993; 2003). Given the various legislative mandates and professional counseling organizations' position statements, school counselors now serve a broader role relative to fos-

tering successful inclusion of students with disabilities. In particular, Schmidt (2003) noted that as a result of such legislative mandates and professional counseling organizations' position statements, school counselors level of involvement has increased to collaborating with other stakeholders (e.g., physical educators) to promote student achievement. Thus, school counselors are now required to address the needs of all students through prevention and intervention programs that are a part of a comprehensive school counseling program (Baker & Gerler, 2008).

### **Collaborative Approaches for Successful Inclusion**

According to the ASCA National Model, collaboration is an important component of fostering successful inclusion of students with disabilities (American School Counselor Association, 2003). Therefore, as opposed to physical educators and school counselors continuously working in isolation with limited knowledge and/or resources, physical educators and school counselors should begin to collaborate to increase both students' with disabilities and schools' levels of achievement (McWhirter, McWhirter, McWhirter, & McWhirter, 1998). For instance, if physical educators do not fully understand the nature and/or severity of students' disabilities, then, school counselors, as a result of their professional preparation regarding disabilities and developmental issues should be able to facilitate physical educators understanding as a means to foster successful inclusion of students with disabilities in physical education contexts (Studer & Quigney, 2003). Moreover, school counselors should be able to work with physical educators and assist them with making practical programmatic decisions relative to grouping, planning inclusive developmentally appropriate activities, and teaching functional skill development regarding students with disabilities (see Table 1).

**Table 1***Collaborative Approaches*

<b>Issues</b>	<b>Strategies</b>	<b>Potential Outcomes</b>
1. The physical education teacher does not understand the nature of a student's disability.	The physical education teacher should invite the school counselor to observe the student's participation in his/her class, review the student's IEP with the school counselor, and seek suggestions from the school counselor regarding the nature of the student's disability.	The physical education teacher develops a broader understanding of the student's disability, is able to plan and implement developmentally appropriate activities, and the student with the disability experiences some success.
2. The physical education teacher has a concern with regard to how to best group (i.e., instruction modification) a student with a disability with his/her peers without disabilities.	The physical education teacher should talk with the school counselor about best practices pertaining to grouping and/or teaching of students with specific disabilities; Invite the school counselor to his/her class to observe the student with the disability group interactions with his/her peers without disabilities, as well as observe the manner in which s/he delivers instruction.	The physical education teacher learns practical ways in which to best group and/or teach the student with the disability with his/her peers without disabilities; The school counselor develops an understanding of the GPE context in which the student with the disability interacts.
3. The physical education teacher has a concern with regard to advocacy for a student with a disability.	The physical education teacher should meet with the school counselor to find out effective advocacy strategies in which the school counselor has used, the physical education teacher should collaborate with the school counselor to strengthen his/her advocacy strategies, and the physical education teacher should actively serve on the IEP team to find out what advocacy strategies are being used by other direct service providers who serve on the student's IEP team.	The physical education teacher gets an opportunity to learn and/or adopt practical advocacy strategies, the physical education teacher has increased advocacy support within the school, and the physical education teacher is better able to advocate for the student with the disability.

### Conclusion

The purposes of this article were to explain the impact federal legislation has on educating students with disabilities, the changing roles of physical educators and school counselors relative to educating students with disabilities, and collaborative approaches pertaining to how physical educators and school counselors could collaboratively foster successful inclusion of students with disabilities in physical education. With the continuous increase of students with disabilities included in physical education within U.S. public schools (Block, 2007; Sciarra, 2004), along with the limited number of qualified personnel to support physical educators (Block, 2007; Block & Rizzo, 1995), it is important for physical educators and school counselors to collaborate.

With regard to fostering successful inclusion of students with disabilities, collaboration with other professionals has become an important component of various legislative mandates as well as professional organization's position statements (American School Counseling Association, 2003). Such emphasis placed on collaboration is important, because the knowledge and resources needed to increase students with disabilities success requires a collaborative effort amongst direct service providers. For instance, when physical educators and school counselors collaborate, practical programmatic decisions (e.g., grouping, planning inclusive developmentally appropriate activities, and teaching functional skill development) could be made that improves the overall quality of the inclusion experience for students with disabilities. In that light, if physical educators and school counselors want to successfully foster the inclusion of students with disabilities, then, physical educators and school counselors should move beyond their traditional roles of working in isolation, and began to collaborate with one another as a means to ensure that students' with disabilities needs are being met

(Frye, 2005). To that end, given the information and the collaborative approaches provided within this article, physical educators and school counselors should be able to identify and address issues of concerns that are negatively affecting students with disabilities inclusion experiences. More importantly, such professionals should be able to collaborate to identify additional practical strategies to address those issues, as well as to identify realistic outcomes.

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