

## PEDAGOGY

# Inclusion in Extracurricular Sport: A How-To Guide for Implementation Strategies

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## Abstract

*Physical activity and extracurricular activity has become a topic of importance in the United States. The nation's government officials have brought to light the need for increased awareness, advocacy, and support of the participation of youth with disabilities in recreation and leisure activities (e.g., extracurricular and school-sanctioned sport). The Government Office of Accountability recently released a "Dear Colleague Letter" bringing awareness to the need to improve acceptance and accountability in including students with disabilities in extracurricular physical activities. The purpose of this article was to provide implementation strategies for inclusion of students with disabilities into physical education opportunities and extracurricular athletics.*

Recreation and leisure activities are necessary for high quality of life for all people, including those with disabilities. Developing an appreciation of and participating in these activities begins during school-aged years. It is imperative that physical education teachers acknowledge, understand, and implement program modifications

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that will facilitate full participation of students with disabilities. The patterns of inactivity in childhood and adolescence correlate to higher rates of inactivity, obesity, and other health problems in adulthood (Biro & Wien, 2010; Caspersen, Pereira, & Curran, 2000; Gordon-Larsen, Adair, & Suchindran, 2007; Whitaker, Wright, Pepe, Seidel, & Dietz, 1997). Despite the public's awareness of the risks related to inactivity and obesity, limited research has been conducted that provides evidence of effective practices and approaches to increase physical activity, reduce obesity, and maintain health among students with disabilities (Durstine, 2000; Kissow & Singhammer, 2012; Li & Chen, 2012; Rimmer, Chen, McCubbin, Drum, & Peterson, 2010). Furthermore, there is limited understanding of how research on children without disabilities can be translated into guidance for physical activity programs for children with disabilities (Rimmer & Rowland, 2008). Among students with disabilities, the lower rates of physical activity may be related to the lack of appropriate opportunities for physical activity, recreation, and athletics. Rimmer and Rowland (2008) reported that physical activity is 4.5 times lower for students with disabilities than their peers without disabilities.

The Obama Administration via the Acting Assistant Secretary of Civil Rights of the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) released a "Dear Colleague Letter" on January 15, 2013, lending support to ensure the inclusion and equal rights of school-aged students with disabilities in extracurricular athletic opportunities. This letter was addressed with urgency and was focused on the need to provide equal rights for students with disabilities within the context of public school extracurricular sport (K–12 and postsecondary education). Access to participation in extracurricular activities is required, per federal regulation, for students with special needs. The Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) of 2004 requires each state to ensure that public agencies provide extracurricular services and activities to afford children with disabilities an equal opportunity for participation. Section 300.107 of IDEIA goes on to say that those services and activities include athletics and transportation. One example of a state following through with implementing this requirement is Indiana's Special Education Rules Title 511 Article 7. For example, 511-ICA 7-42-10(b)(2) states that public school agencies must provide students with the services required to "ensure that students with disabilities participate with nondisabled students in the extracurricular services and activities to the maximum extent

appropriate...” The same section of Article 7 defines extracurricular activities to include athletics. Additionally, 511-IAC 7-43-1(u) (A) requires public school agencies to include transportation “for participation in nonacademic and extracurricular activities if transportation is provided to nondisabled students.” Although including students with disabilities in extracurricular and physical activities is not a new concept, many public schools in the United States have overlooked it for many years. The purpose of this article was to provide implementation strategies for inclusion of students with disabilities into physical education opportunities and extracurricular athletics. An overview of the problem is discussed and suggestions are given to increase opportunities for students with disabilities to access physical activities including physical education and extracurricular athletics.

### **History of Sport and Youth With Disabilities**

To fully understand the message delivered by the OCR in its “Dear Colleague Letter,” it is important to understand the laws that preceded the letter. Currently, over 95% of children with disabilities are mainstreamed in regular public school programs (IDEIA, 2004). IDEIA (2004) requires public school programming and supports to be provided in education systems for students with disabilities within a least restrictive environment. This means that students with disabilities must be permitted to participate with their typical peers in the general education setting as much as possible. Although physical activity professionals (e.g., coaches and trainers) and physical education teachers would agree that schools have made significant progress regarding implementation related to academics, it appears they have made little progress regarding implementation related to school-sanctioned athletics.

To more fully appreciate inclusion related to school-sanctioned athletics, the history of youth sports in general needs to be considered. During the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, highly organized youth sport programs were implemented in the United States (Wiggins, 2013). Initially, these programs were available mainly to White males. African American males were prohibited from competing alongside their White peers, and girls of all races struggled to break the barriers prohibiting their participation based upon notions that girls possessed limited and fragile physical and emotional capabilities (Wiggins, 2013). These significant barriers of race and gender began to crumble during the Civil Rights Movement. Near the end of the Civil Rights Movement and with the passing of public law PL

93-112, the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, African American boys were permitted to compete with and against their White peers. Girls, however, had to continue pursuing the right to be included, which led to a civil rights investigation in 1973 that ultimately led to a 1974 decision from Congress that permitted girls to participate in the National Little League baseball program.

Although legislation and laws that governed youth sports changed as a result of the Civil Rights Movement, implementation at the local level was not immediate. There is a similar pattern today with the efforts for full inclusion of students with disabilities into school-sanctioned athletics. The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 protects the civil and constitutional rights of people with disabilities from discrimination. Section 504 of that law provides protection for public school students with disabilities from discrimination. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 states that

no otherwise qualified individual with a disability in the United States... shall, solely by reason of his or her disability, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.

The law goes on to require public schools to provide a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) through ensuring that students with disabilities have equal access and opportunity to participate in all activities, including athletics. Around the same time, Public Law 94-142, the Education for Handicapped Children Act of 1975, was passed to ensure equal opportunities for students with disabilities in public education. As during the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, there was not a sense of urgency to implement changes toward accommodating and providing equal opportunities for students with disabilities.

Fast-forward 17 years to the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990, which is described as “the most sweeping civil rights legislation in a quarter century,... seeks to eliminate the bias by private and public enterprises...” (Dempsey, 1991, p. 310). Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 applies to those who receive federal funds, whereas the ADA applies to every entity except churches and private clubs (Smith, 2001). The ADA contains a section that outlines the guidelines that are specific to the participation of students with disabilities in sports. For inclusion to be ensured to the student with a disability in sport, the student must be otherwise

qualified to participate and the accommodations for success need to be reasonable. The guidelines in the ADA may be interpreted in many ways and may be the reason why some organizations find ways around this law (“Special Education and Sports,” 2013). Also in 1990, Public Law 101-476, the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act of 1990, mandated that financial support be given from the federal government to meet the proposed changes: due process rights, Individualized Education Plans, the Child Find Mandate, personnel training and development, and a least restrictive environment. Since then, several new laws and amendments have been passed to ensure the full inclusion of students with disabilities in the public education setting. Currently, Public Law 108-446, IDEIA (2004), is in effect and ensures that students with disabilities are included, to the maximum extent appropriate, in the general education setting.

Although several significant pieces of legislation prevent discrimination of students with disabilities (Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990, Individuals With Disabilities Education Act of 1990, and Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004), implementation at the local level has been delayed in a similar manner as the implementation for African American boys and girls following the Civil Rights Movement. Perhaps the recent release of the “Dear Colleague Letter” will be the catalyst needed for meaningful discussion regarding the establishment of clear guidelines, which will lead to full implementation and equal access for students with disabilities through participation in school-sanctioned athletics, which will lead to increased physical activity.

Typically, students with disabilities engage in very little school-based physical activity, less healthy after-school activity, and more sedentary amusements (Rimmer & Rowland, 2008). The U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO, 2010) revealed that despite legislation obligating states and schools to provide equal access, opportunities for physical activity are limited for students with disabilities. As such, the GAO reported in 2010 that 440,000 students with disabilities received services under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 rather than IDEIA (2004). Like IDEIA, Section 504 ensures that equal rights and opportunities are extended to children with disabilities in education (including physical education and extracurricular sport) and other settings. Unlike IDEIA, Section 504

is not government funded. This makes it unlikely that students with disabilities under a 504 plan are receiving equal sports and physical activity opportunities as their peers without disabilities.

However, there is a dearth of scholarly information about the effective inclusion practices for students with disabilities. Even with the limited research on effective practices, there is growing evidence in the research literature regarding common obstacles and barriers to physical activity for students with disabilities (Rimmer, et al., 2010).

### **Potential Barriers to Implementation**

Common barriers are inaccessible facilities and equipment (Auxter, Pyfer, Zittel, & Roth, 2010; Block, 2007; Rimmer, 2005; Rimmer & Rowland, 2008; Simeonsson, Carlson, Huntington, McMillen, & Brent, 2001; Stanish, 2010); personnel without sufficient training (Auxter et al., 2010; Block, 2007; Rimmer & Rowland, 2008; Stanish, 2010); and inadequate, noncompliant, or otherwise inaccessible programs and syllabi (Auxter et al., 2010; Block, 2007; Rimmer, 2005; Rimmer & Rowland, 2008; Simeonsson et al., 2001).

Educators agree that all children should have equal access to participate in competitive athletics. Students with disabilities are intelligent, productive, capable, and uniquely strong individuals. They deserve equal respect, consideration, and access. However, school officials may encounter significant barriers. Perhaps the most significant barrier is access to sufficient resources needed to implement the modifications/accommodations needed for students with disabilities to participate fully in school-sanctioned athletics. Specifically, a lack of dollars and personnel are common barriers in schools.

In recent years, federal and state allocations to public schools have been significantly reduced. Public schools are operated on federal, state, and local dollars. Unlike other businesses, public schools have limited opportunities to increase their revenue. Unless a community votes to voluntarily increase property taxes, a public school cannot increase revenue on which to operate. Additionally, school officials are not permitted to reference a lack of funding when discussing the needs of students with disabilities. Yet, public school officials are often asked to do more with less and are then charged with the vital role of educating all students to be independent young adults who are prepared to transition successfully into the workforce. To address the need for financial support, stakeholders may

use several resources. Financial support may be obtained through grants, scholarships, foundations, and discussing and advocating for funding through the school district.

Additionally, each student with a disability has an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Federal law (IDEIA) and Indiana special education law (Title 511, Indiana State Board of Education, Article 7) require a student's IEP to include all special education supports, including physical education (as a direct service) and other necessary related services (e.g., physical therapy, occupational therapy) to demonstrate adequate school progress. For example, a student who is deaf may need an educational interpreter (EI) during the school day. This support is required for the student to demonstrate academic progress. If that same student plays tennis, an EI must be provided for that student during tennis season. The EI goes to practice, travels on the bus, and is with the student during meets. Another example is a student manager for the basketball team who has cerebral palsy, is nonambulatory, and uses a wheelchair. This student has the right to be fully included with equal access. However, the same supports for athletics must be provided that are written into his IEP for education. This student's IEP likely includes special transportation as a related service. This means transportation must be provided for this student to and from basketball games via the use of a lift bus. Since a lift bus is not large enough to transport the entire team, two buses will need to be driven to the game or another accommodation for transportation will need to be provided. Providing qualified personnel needed for service delivery during evening and weekend hours is a barrier for the school. Employing qualified personnel to provide support for students with disabilities to participate in extracurricular sports may best be accomplished through partnerships with key stakeholders. By advocating for the cause (e.g., need for extracurricular PA opportunities for youth with disabilities), school officials can find knowledgeable personnel. Parents, community leaders, local recreation centers, and/or local Special Olympic organizations are excellent resources to use as coaches and/or supports when trying to include students with disabilities into mainstream sports.

To overcome these barriers, stakeholders will need to collaborate. Often all it takes is someone who will advocate for the student with the disability. This can be a teacher, coach, parent, friend, sibling, or the student. Educators, parents, student-athletes, business owners, and community members must engage in meaningful discussions regarding solutions to barriers. Without these discussions,

change is unlikely to occur. The first step to improving inclusion in extracurricular sports is to advocate and provide a voice for students with disabilities who want to participate. In cases where students with disabilities are not involved in extracurricular sports or activities, stakeholders need to provide information to students with disabilities on how to become more involved and ensure them that they will be provided the appropriate accommodations. With this encouragement, students with disabilities may be more inclined to participate in competitive extracurricular sports teams. For students who are physically or cognitively unable to benefit from participation through typical competitive teams, school officials may wish to consider other options through collaboration with key stakeholders. For example, alternative opportunities to participate on competitive teams (e.g., wheelchair basketball) could be implemented, and partnerships with local chapters of Special Olympics may also benefit students with disabilities.

### **Current Participation in Extracurricular Sports**

Sports participation among individuals with disabilities has been shown to promote healthier lifestyles (Machek, Stopka, Tillman, Sneed, & Naugle, 2008), increase self-esteem (Castagno, 2001), enhance peer acceptance (Gibbons & Bushakra, 1989), and boost perceived competence (Gibbons & Bushakra, 1989). Generally speaking, students with disabilities participate in extracurricular sports at a lower rate than their same-aged peer without disabilities (GAO, 2010). Although extracurricular sports programming has been developed in some public schools for youth with disabilities, officials at many schools reported a lack of funding and informational support in creating more athletic opportunities for their youth with disabilities (GAO, 2010).

Although support has been given to ensure the inclusion of students with disabilities in sports (e.g., OCR, 2013), at first glance, it seems daunting to include students with disabilities in organized and extracurricular sports. However, by participating in training and instruction, educators and coaches can easily include all students as accommodations and modifications come in all shapes and sizes. There is a need to advocate for equal opportunities for students with disabilities in extracurricular athletics that are appropriate and mindful of their ability levels. How-to tips are offered in this paper to ensure that physical education teachers, coaches, general education teachers, parents of children with disabilities, and/or athletes

(or potential athletes) with disabilities are advocating for and implementing opportunities to participate in K–12 and postsecondary extracurricular athletics. These include organized competitive sport, club, and intramural athletics (OCR, 2013).

### **Advocating for Students and Athletes With Disabilities**

Students with disabilities are much like their peers without disabilities. One similarity is that they need the support of mentors (e.g., teachers, coaches, parents, and friends) to reach their potential. Unfortunately, based on the data reported by the GAO (2010), students with disabilities are not likely to be engaged in extracurricular sports or activities. Therefore, educators and coaches must look for potential athletes (with disabilities) and encourage them to participate.

#### **What can you do?**

1. Get to know the students with disabilities in your school and community. What are their interests? What do they do in their free time? What would they like to do?
2. Educate yourself on the disabilities the students in your school and/or community have to best meet their needs and encourage them to participate in extracurricular sports. A helpful tool available online is <http://nichcy.org/disability/categories>, with a list of each disability category identified under IDEIA and a brief description of each.
3. Interact with students with disabilities and encourage interaction among peers to support positive social interaction and support. This may be done in several ways (e.g., peer tutoring programs, open recreation nights, disability awareness programs), which will be discussed later.
4. Get to know a special education teacher in your building. Ask him or her for ideas regarding how to include students with disabilities in a meaningful way. Additionally, several organizations provide informational training for potential coaches (e.g., BlazeSports and Special Olympics).

### **Breaking Through the Stereotypes**

At first glance, it is easy to assume individuals with disabilities cannot do a particular task; however, this may not be the case. Students with disabilities are capable of many tasks and have individual strengths and weaknesses like their peers without disabilities. Working with students with disabilities may help teachers develop

greater empathy and better understand their needs. By becoming advocates and using appropriate and nondiscriminating language (e.g., person-first, disability-second language), teachers model acceptable behaviors for others in the school, in the community, or on the team.

### **What can you do?**

1. Encourage disability awareness activities that promote an understanding and exposure to, experience with, and ownership of what it means to have a disability. Lieberman and Houston-Wilson (2009) suggested that through a positive disability awareness program, educators and coaches can easily facilitate the inclusion of students with disabilities.
2. Encourage open and positive communication between students with and without disabilities. This can be done during the school day or outside of school (before or after school) such as pickup games, field trips, and movie screenings. These activities will be fun for everyone, and students will feel encouraged to communicate openly and develop friendships. Without open communication, students with and without disabilities may feel excluded from a particular activity.
3. Use person-first language. When talking to or about an individual with a disability do not identify them by their disability first. By using person-first language, you are demonstrating that you are aware that a person is not defined by his or her disability.
4. When negative communication is occurring (e.g., “that kid is retarded”), address it immediately and educate all parties involved on what it means to use derogatory language.

### **Adapting for the Athlete**

One common misconception is that individuals with disabilities are unable to participate in “regular” sports. This is often not the case, particularly in regard to youth with physical disabilities. Individuals who are deaf may need additional visual cues to understand what they need to do. Students who use a prosthetic or have an amputation may need instructions on using equipment through modifications or competing in an activity. As long as the adaptation does not “change” the game/activity, it is appropriate, and individuals with disabilities can and should be included.

### **What can you do?**

1. Be creative, and get to know students with disabilities who are interested in getting involved in extracurricular sport ac-

tivities. Adaptations can be made regardless of the sport and athletes with disabilities should be encouraged to participate in inclusive school sports. It is important to include students with disabilities in the process of identifying which accommodations/modifications may work best for them. Ask your students what works best and try it out.

2. Be flexible and use your resources. There are plenty of on-line resources that you may use to educate yourself and your athletes. PE Central has an adapted physical education link (<http://www.pecentral.org/adapted/adaptedmenu.html>) with lesson ideas and links to topics such as assessment, IEP development, and working with parents and paraeducators. The USA Deaf Sports Federation (<http://www.usdeafsports.org>), United States Association for Blind Athletes (<http://www.usaba.org>), and Disabled Sports USA (<http://www.disabledsportsusa.org>) are a few official organizations that offer information that may aid in educating people on how to include individuals with disabilities into extracurricular sports.
3. Encourage your students with disabilities to try new activities. Much like students without disabilities, they sometimes do not know that they are good at an activity without first trying it. By creating open gyms and unofficial practices, all students can try the sport without feeling the pressure of being the best.

### **Different Can Still Be Equal...and Fun**

Sometimes the modifications necessary to include students with disabilities change the game/sport too much or create unsafe environments for the athletes. In these cases, disability-oriented sports are available that create fun and competitive physical activity for youth with disabilities. For example, goalball ([www.goalball.us](http://www.goalball.us)) and beep baseball (<http://www.nbba.org>) teams may be created for youth with and without visual impairments. Additionally, several wheelchair sports have been developed to ensure individuals who use wheelchairs can participate in competitive sport. For example, wheelchair basketball (<http://www.nwba.org>), tennis (<http://www.usta.com/Play-Tennis/Wheelchair-Tennis/Wheelchair/>), and rugby (<http://www.quadrugby.com>) teams have been developed to increase participation for athletes using wheelchairs. Additionally, several sports may be modified for individuals with disabilities (e.g., track

and field, swimming, judo, baseball). Information regarding which sports are available for individuals with disabilities may be found at <http://www.specialolympics.org> and/or <http://www.teamusa.org/US-Paralympics.aspx>.

### **What can you do?**

1. Again, use your resources, search the Internet (see links already listed), and reach out to community partners to see what is already available in your community. Professionals at the local YMCA and Special Olympic organizations (<http://www.specialolympics.org>) are great resources to figure out what is already available in your community. Many times, practitioners at small local organizations work specifically with individuals with disabilities and already have small teams in place. If this is not the case in your area, start your own teams and reach out to officials at local organizations and schools to expand participation.
2. Infuse disability sport units into a physical education curriculum. By participating in disability sports, students learn a great deal and are exposed to what is available while participating in the same amount of physical activity as they would playing a mainstream sport.
3. Create open recreation nights, and invite all students/athletes with and without disabilities to come together and play their sport. With an inclusive environment designed around promoting physical activity for everyone, word will likely get out and teams or events will be created.

## **Conclusion**

States and school district officials can increase opportunities for students with disabilities by reducing or eliminating common barriers to participating in physical activities. Students with and without disabilities may benefit from working together to promote successful participation in inclusive extracurricular sports and activities. Everyone, regardless of ability level, disability, or interest, has the right to be included in organized physical activity. Due to the support of the GAO and the legislation behind the right to equal opportunities (OCR), now is the time to advocate and take a stand on including and creating opportunities for students/athletes with disabilities to participate in extracurricular sports and activities.

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