

Alliance for Athletics Equity for Students with Disabilities Responds to New GAO Study

GAO Study Finds More Guidance Could Improve Opportunities in Physical Education and Athletics for Students with Disabilities

Washington, DC June 24, 2010 – Identifying an important need to expand physical activity and athletic opportunities for individuals with disabilities in our educational institutions, the Alliance in Support of Athletics Equity for Students with Disabilities works to advance sports opportunities for students with disabilities. The Alliance, led by the Center for Sport in Society at Northeastern University (SIS), in partnership with American Association of Adapted Sports Programs (AAASP), the Inclusive Fitness Coalition (IFC), and Special Olympics (SO), is comprised of over 100 organizations representing a cross sector of the disability rights, sport, health and fitness, and civil rights community.

Recognizing the limited information that existed about the state of physical activity opportunities for individuals with disabilities in the school setting, the Alliance worked in partnership with members of Congress, including Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA), Rep. George Miller (D-CA), Congresswoman Carolyn McCarthy (D-NY), and Rep. Chris Van Hollen (D-MD), to request a GAO study to examine this issue in greater detail.

The results released yesterday confirm the need for continued action and advocacy on behalf of students with disabilities. Specifically, the report noted that students with disabilities participate in athletics at consistently lower rates than students without disabilities. Beverly Vaughn, Co-founder/Executive Director of the American Association of Adapted Sports Programs (AAASP) said, “The results of this study show that we still have a long way to go in providing athletic equity in this country for students with physical disabilities. These students want to compete in sports just as their friends and siblings do, providing anything less than what other children receive on a regular basis is not an option.”

The findings recognized the positive benefits sports participation bring to students with disabilities including health, social well being, and improved self esteem. Special Olympics Chairman and CEO Timothy Shriver confirmed, “Years of research and anecdotes demonstrate the desperate need for opportunities for people with disabilities and the dramatic impact experienced through participation in sport. The vast majority of Special Olympics athletes benefit from increased self esteem, self confidence, social relationships at work/school, and physical abilities.”

On the other hand, the lack of opportunity to participate in physical education and athletics has been linked to a higher prevalence of obesity and obesity-related secondary conditions in youth with disabilities compared to youth without disabilities. James Rimmer, Co-Chair of the Inclusive Fitness Coalition and Director

of the National Center on Physical Activity and Disability (NCPAD) said, “An effective national strategy to lower overweight/obesity among youth with disabilities and reduce the potential risk of obesity-related secondary conditions in adulthood must focus on prevention strategies that begin early in life, such as including youth with disabilities in physical education and athletic opportunities, so that healthy lifestyle habits are established during this important developmental period.”

Despite these benefits, the GAO report confirmed that students with disabilities are not receiving the same amount of physical activity and athletic opportunities as students without disabilities. To help close this gap, the GAO called on the Department of Education to provide resources to assist state and schools in serving students with disabilities in physical activity settings and to produce guidance to clarify schools’ responsibilities under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act to provide athletic opportunities for students with disabilities.

“The Alliance applauds the GAO’s leadership in conducting this report and endorses their recommendations,” said Eli Wolff of the Center for Sport in Society at Northeastern University. “We will continue to work diligently to advance policies that will ensure that students with disabilities are provided opportunities to participate in and receive benefits from school-based athletic programs.”

If you’d like more information about this topic, please contact: Terri Lakowski, Director, Alliance for Athletics Equity for Students with Disabilities at 314-517-0116 or Terri@TerriLakowski.com.

You can download a complete copy of the report at:
<http://www.gao.gov/Products/GAO-10-519>

Please see the attached Addendum A for statements from supporting members of Congress.

Addendum A

Statements from supporting members of Congress on the GAO Study:

“The health and social benefits of physical activity and athletic participation are well established. These benefits may be even more important for students with disabilities, who are at a greater risk for being sedentary and developing secondary conditions. Students with disabilities should have an equal opportunity to participate in PE and in extracurricular athletics or adaptive sports if they so desire, and we need to do all we can to encourage such participation.” said **Senator Tom Harkin**.

“All students, including students with disabilities, should have the opportunities to reap the benefits of physical activity in school and out of school. Sports teach children skills that they will use throughout their lives,” said **U.S. Rep. George Miller (D-CA)**, chair of the House Education and Labor Committee and original requestor of the GAO report. “It is clear from the GAO report that more work has to be done by schools and the Department of Education to remove the barriers preventing students with disabilities from fully participating in physical education and athletics.”

“While many schools have made great strides educating students with disabilities in mainstream academic classrooms, sports programs and physical education classes are the final frontier for full inclusion in schools,” said **Congresswoman Carolyn McCarthy**. “Research shows that as many as 56 percent of individuals with disabilities fail to participate in any physical activity. The benefit of increased physical activity of all people, including those with disabilities, is well established, but understanding the barriers to participation specific to students with disabilities is critical to crafting appropriate responses. The GAO Report is a step toward understanding and addressing these barriers. I look forward to working with Chairman Miller, the Department of Education, and interested students, parents, and groups to respond to the concerns raised and recommendations provided in the GAO report.”

“I thank the GAO for conducting this study. As we see from their conclusions, while many schools make good faith efforts to include students with disabilities, we can do more to provide guidance on best practices and the requirements of the federal law. I look forward to working with the Department of Education to disseminate this information on the local level.” **Rep. Chris Van Hollen (D-MD)**.