Inclusive Fitness Coalition: Summary of GAO Report Key Findings

**Background**
In June, 2010, following the concerted efforts of over 100 groups comprising the Inclusive Fitness Coalition (IFC), the Government Accountability Office (GAO) completed its first ever study on the state of physical activity and athletic opportunities for students with disabilities. Recognizing the limited information that existed about the state of physical activity opportunities for individuals with disabilities in the school setting, the IFC 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.

**Scope of Study**
Regarding students with disabilities, GAO examined:

1. what is known about the PE opportunities that schools provide, and how do schools provide these;
2. what is known about the extracurricular athletic opportunities that schools provide, and how do schools provide these; and
3. how the Department of Education (Education) assists states and schools in these areas.

GAO analyzed federal survey data; reviewed relevant federal laws and regulations; and interviewed state, district, and school officials in selected states, as well as parents and disability association officials.

**Key Findings**

- Students with disabilities benefit from the positive social and health benefits of participation in physical activity and sports.

**Physical Education**

- Schools generally provide students with and without disabilities comparable opportunities to participate in physical education (PE).
- Most students with disabilities who participate in PE are accommodated through mainstream, not adapted PE programs.
- Mainstream PE teachers lack adequate training and feel "insufficiently prepared" to teach students with disabilities.
- Additional barriers identified that hinder the effective accommodation of students with disabilities in physical education included limited resources for adapted or specialized equipment and inaccessible facilities.

**Percentage Increase in PE Waivers for Youth with Disabilities, by Disability and School Level**

![Graph showing percentage increase in PE waivers for youth with disabilities, by disability and school level.](image)

Extracurricular Athletics

- No reliable national data exists that allows for an accurate comparison of participation rates in extracurricular athletics of students with disabilities to students without disabilities.
- Among the data that does exist, findings indicated that boys with disabilities participate in sports at consistently higher rates than girls with disabilities across all age groups.
- IDEA students participate in school-based extracurricular athletics at lower rates than non-IDEA students.
- Schools provide varying levels of accommodation for students with disabilities; those accommodations that do occur, are primarily through mainstream athletics programs, not the creation of adapted programs.
- District, local, and state school officials generally lack information on how to provide athletic opportunities for students with disabilities.
- Officials lack information and clarity on their legal requirements on the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 to provide extracurricular athletic opportunities for students with disabilities.
- In addition to lack of information, additional barriers identified to the provision of athletic opportunities included lack of transportation, inaccessible facilities, lack of adapted equipment, budget constraints, and lack of trained coaches and personnel.

Department of Education

- The Office for Civil Rights (OCR) has not provided schools with guidance clarifying their obligations to provide students with disabilities with PE and athletic opportunities under the Rehab Act.
- The Department of Education (ED) has distributed very little funds or grants to support PE or athletic opportunities for students with disabilities.
- Officials said they would benefit from additional resources and guidance from ED on providing PE and athletic opportunities for students with disabilities.

Key Recommendations

- ED should clarify schools’ obligations under the Rehab Act to provide athletic opportunities for students with disabilities.
- ED should provide resources and facilitate information sharing to assist state and schools in serving students with disabilities in PE and athletics.

Conclusion: IFC-Next Steps

The GAO study results confirm the need for continued action and advocacy on behalf of students with disabilities. In response to the GAO study, ED publicly committed to carrying out the recommendations of the report. The Inclusive Fitness Coalition is actively working with ED on this process to ensure that the rights of individuals with disabilities in PE and athletics are sufficiently addressed and protected.

1The Inclusive Fitness Coalition is an umbrella organization that subsumed the work of the Alliance for Athletic Equity for Students with Disabilities who led the commissioning of the study. The response of the Alliance to the GAO study can be found at http://www.adaptedsports.org/adaptedsports/media/pr_43.html.
2The GAO Study can be downloaded at: http://www.gao.gov/Products/GAO-10-519.
3See Students with Disabilities, GAO June, 2010. (herein Study)
4Study at 16 (“Only 32 percent of teachers surveyed who taught required PE classes reported having received training on how to work with students with long-term physical, medical, or cognitive disabilities”)

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