2011 Policy Briefing Document

The Issue
Individuals with and without disabilities, female and male, must be provided with equal opportunities to participate in health and wellness, physical activity, and sports programs, mainstreaming such participation to the fullest extent possible and providing adapted programs when necessary. This is especially true in our educational institutions where students with disabilities must be provided with participation opportunities and resources in physical activity and athletic programs that are equivalent to those provided to students without disabilities.

In 2011 the policy group will focus on addressing the barriers inhibiting children and youth with disabilities from participating in sport and physical activity programs. For youth to develop into self-aware, civically engaged, contributing members of society, they require equal access to resources that will enable them to feel safe, healthy and included. Youth with disabilities, however, are consistently excluded from participating in mainstream society and fully accessing these resources. Many individuals with disabilities would tell you that their exclusion is due to:

- physical and attitudinal barriers
- stigma and stereotypes
- a chronic lack of opportunity

Although society has significantly improved the treatment and inclusion of individuals with disabilities since the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 and the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, people with disabilities are still facing pervasive inequities in physical activity programs and sports programs, particularly in our educational institutions. Comprehensive change is needed to address the systemic exclusion and discrimination students with disabilities face specifically in regards to physical activity opportunities and resources for sports participation.

Position
We know that comprehensive change is needed to address the systemic exclusion and discrimination individuals with disabilities face in terms of access to health and wellness and physical activity programs. The Inclusive Fitness Coalition is working on a multi-prong policy agenda that will ensure that individuals with disabilities are provided opportunities to participate in and receive benefits from health and physical activity programs.¹
Inclusive Language and Programming
All legislation regarding physical activity, obesity and wellness must include specific language that addresses the requirement for inclusion of people with disabilities.

Office for Civil Rights Guidance
The Office for Civil Rights within the Department of Education must strengthen the athletic regulations under the Rehabilitation Act. Additional guidance or regulations are needed to more clearly define schools’ obligations to provide students with disabilities equal opportunities and resources to compete in physical education and athletics.

Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services Resources
The Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services must develop resources and technical assistance on issues surrounding the participation of individuals with disabilities in health and physical activity programs. This information is necessary to ensure not only that officials understand their legal obligations to provide opportunities to individuals with disabilities, but that they have the resources and training necessary to do so.

About the Inclusive Fitness Coalition
The Inclusive Fitness Coalition (IFC) is a national coalition of over 170 organizations dedicated to addressing the policy, environmental, and societal issues associated with the lack of inclusion and access to physical activity among people with disabilities. As part of this work, the IFC will be launching a policy working group to oversee a comprehensive initiative to advance systemic change for individuals with disabilities through a coordination of policy, advocacy and education efforts.2

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1Some states have begun to address these issues, such as Maryland, which recently passed the Fitness and Athletics Equity for Students with Disabilities Act in 2008. In addition, the Government Accounting Office (GAO) recently released a study that examined the state of athletic and physical education programming opportunities for students with disabilities. Specifically, the GAO called on the Department of Education to provide resources to assist states 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.

2Members of the Inclusive Fitness Coalition (IFC) are diverse organizations representing advocacy groups, professional societies, manufacturers, health and fitness companies, and others. All share the goal of promoting inclusive opportunities in physical activity, sport and recreation for people with disabilities. The IFC is not a lobbying organization. Actions and statements made on behalf of the IFC are not intended to represent the views of any individual or organization.