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VOLUME 7, NUMBER 4

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COVER STORY

Developing School Sports Programs for Students with Disabilities: Schools should develop long-term strategies for adding new sports for students with disabilities. —Terri Lakowski and Bev Vaughn

Cover photo provided by Ed Wolff, Seven Hills, Ohio.

High School Today, an official publication of the National Federation of State High School Associations, is published eight times a year by the NFHS.

SUBSCRIPTION PRICE
One-year subscription is $24.95. Canada add $3.71 per year surface postage. All other foreign subscribers, please contact the NFHS office for shipping rates. Back issues are $3.00 plus actual postage.

EDITORIAL/ADVERTISING OFFICES
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Developing School Sports Programs for Students with Disabilities

BY TERRI LAKOWSKI AND BEV VAUGHN

Department of Education Guidance

On January 24, 2013, the Office for Civil Rights issued a Dear Colleague Letter clarifying the obligation of schools under the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Rehab Act) to provide extracurricular athletic opportunities for students with disabilities. The guidance requires that students with disabilities be provided equivalent opportunities for physical activity and sports. A 2010 report from the General Accountability Office, which showed that students with disabilities participated in athletics at significantly lower rates than students without disabilities, sparked this federal guidance to schools.

Overview

This guidance clarifies the responsibility of schools to provide athletic opportunities for students with disabilities. It applies to all educational institutions – both public and private – that receive federal financial assistance. That includes all levels of education – from elementary schools to high schools, to colleges and universities.

It clarifies when and how schools must include students with disabilities in mainstream athletic programs, defines what true equal treatment of student-athletes with disabilities means, and encourages and provides a roadmap for schools to create adapted programs for students with disabilities.

Coaches, athletic administrators and schools will play a significant role in implementing these new regulations and providing students with disabilities opportunities to participate.

Mainstream Athletic Program

To provide students with disabilities equal opportunities means that students with disabilities have the right to try out to participate in school-based extracurricular activities in a manner consistent with the tryout procedures afforded to other students.

To enable participation, students with disabilities must be provided with reasonable accommodations to include them to the fullest extent possible in athletic programs. A reasonable accommodation means the modification of existing policies, practices or rules in order to include a student with a disability.

Where a dispute or disagreement arises regarding the reasonability of the accommodation requested by a student with disability, the guidance requires that the athletic department provide the student with an individualized assessment to determine his/her ability to participate in the program.

Individual Assessment

The individualized assessment means that the athletic department will evaluate a student with a disability based on the specific nature of his/her disability and the specific accommodations the individual needs to participate in the athletic program.

An accommodation is considered reasonable where it does not:
1. Alter an essential aspect of the game or,
2. Provide the student with a disability with a competitive advantage.

Take for example the sport of basketball. It would be considered reasonable to provide an interpreter to enable the participation of a deaf athlete on the team. However, it would not be reasonable to include a student who uses a wheelchair in the mainstream program because that modification would change an essential aspect of the game of basketball.

Another example of reasonable accommodation would be in tennis, where the U.S. Tennis Association’s rules stipulate that people with disabilities are allowed two bounces in order to include them in mainstream play.
In track and field, including an athlete with an amputation or an athlete with a visual impairment who uses a guide runner would be considered reasonable accommodations. However, including an athlete participating in a wheelchair in a heat scored against an athlete without a disability would not be a reasonable accommodation because the athlete with a disability in that instance would have a competitive advantage.

Students with disabilities using wheelchairs who wish to participate in track and field can easily be included; however, that can be done through the creation of adapted track and field.

**Adapted Sports**

The guidance says that schools should create adapted programs for students with disabilities who cannot participate in the existing athletics programs even with reasonable accommodations. Adapted programs are sport programs that are specifically developed for the physical, psychological and social needs of students with physical disabilities.

Adapted track and field, as mentioned above, is an increasingly popular adapted sport that can easily be integrated into a school’s existing sports infrastructure. As an example, the Georgia High School Association (GHSA) and the Florida High School Athletic Association (FHSAA), in partnership and consultation with the American Association of Adapted Sports Programs, Inc. (AAASP), added a wheelchair track and field division to their existing track and field programs. Any high school student with a physical disability attending a GHSA or FHSAA member school has access to participation on their high school track and field team in the wheelchair division. The wheelchair events are part of the high school track and field extracurricular athletic offerings and participating students are members of their school team and compete at regular-season meets. The top eight qualifying boys and girls in each event advance to the state GHSA and FHSAA track and field meets each spring and receive points in their respective divisions along with a state championship trophy.

Other types of adapted interscholastic team sports are also offered by AAASP, which works in partnership with states and schools to provide opportunities for students with physical disabilities to participate in athletic programs that are offered during the school year.

These teams include wheelchair team handball provided in the fall season, wheelchair basketball during the winter season and wheelchair football during the spring season. All students participate in a wheelchair, whether they use one on a daily basis or not. This helps level the playing field and engages more students with physical disabilities in athletics. Players learn basic fundamental sports skills in the fall that they build upon and translate to other sports throughout the school year, while receiving an equitable opportunity to take part in competitive school-based sports.

The adapted sports programs are integrated into the school system’s existing athletic structure and have: 1) standardized seasons, 2) regular-season and post-season competition, 3) playing rules, 4) safety guidelines, 5) inclusive policies and procedures, 6) educational training for school personnel, including coaches and officials. The adapted programs are cost-effective and adhere to the OCR guidelines.

**Tips To Get Started:**

1. **Survey the Landscape At Your Institution**

   To better understand your capacity to provide programs, assess what programming and opportunities currently exist in your school and within your state association. For example, do you know if students with disabilities participated in your athletic programs in the past and what accommodations were required to enable their participation?

   Looking to the larger sports landscape in your region will also provide helpful information, and will allow you to understand where interests and preferences lie among your student population.

   Gathering information on how many students in your school have disabilities, such as with a 504 Plan or IEP, will also be a helpful starting point to gauge how many students with disabilities attend your school.

2. **Modify Existing Athletic Policies to Ensure Inclusion of Students with Disabilities**

   What policies exist to address a request of a student with disability to participate?

   Coaches, schools and athletic directors should create a process for conducting an individualized assessment to ensure students with disabilities are provided equal opportunity to participate in athletic programs.

3. **Develop a Plan for Adding Adapted Sports**

   Creating new sports takes time. Work with your team at your school to develop a long-term strategy to add new sports for students with disabilities into your athletic program.

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