STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

More Information and Guidance Could Improve Opportunities in Physical Education and Athletics

What GAO Found

Schools provide students with and without disabilities similar opportunities to participate in PE but face challenges when serving students with disabilities. Students with disabilities spend similar amounts of time in PE class and exercising in class as students without disabilities, according to national data and GAO site visits. Most students with disabilities take PE with other students in general PE classes. To facilitate their participation, teachers may make accommodations for some students, such as providing additional modeling or repetition. Many state, district, and school officials GAO interviewed cited teacher preparation and budget constraints as key challenges to serving students with disabilities in general PE classes. For example, they said general PE teachers need more training opportunities on working specifically with students with disabilities, yet resources for training are not always available.

Limited national data suggest that students with disabilities participate in extracurricular athletics, but do not distinguish whether these opportunities are offered through schools or community programs. Among the schools GAO visited, students with disabilities participated in athletics at varying rates, but at consistently lower rates than students without disabilities. Several factors, such as a student’s disability type or outreach to students, may affect participation. Some schools or districts GAO interviewed provided opportunities by partnering with community programs or offering athletics designed specifically for students with disabilities, such as wheelchair basketball. District and school officials GAO interviewed cited a lack of information on ways to expand athletic opportunities, lack of clarity regarding schools’ responsibilities, and budget constraints as key challenges.

Education has provided little information or guidance on PE or extracurricular athletics for students with disabilities, and some states and districts GAO interviewed said more would be useful. According to agency officials, Education has not provided much information or guidance because it has targeted its limited resources on other areas, such as monitoring priorities specified in federal law. Officials from several states and many districts said they could benefit from Education helping states and schools to share information on practices or resources regarding PE and athletics for students with disabilities. Officials from districts and disability groups also said more clarification from Education on schools’ responsibilities under federal law on extracurricular athletics for students with disabilities would be useful.

What GAO Recommends

To improve the opportunities for students with disabilities in PE and athletics, GAO recommends that the Secretary of Education facilitate information sharing among states and schools on ways to provide opportunities and clarify schools’ responsibilities under federal law. Education agreed with both of our recommendations.

Adapted Athletics