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Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-10-519](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Research has established that physical activity and participation in athletics provides important health and social benefits for children. Certain federal laws help ensure that kindergarten-12th grade schools provide students with disabilities opportunities to participate in physical education (PE) and extracurricular athletics equal to those of their peers. However, national associations have questioned whether students with disabilities receive opportunities similar to their peers.

Regarding students with disabilities, GAO was asked to examine (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.

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.

View [GAO-10-519](#) or [key components](#). For more information, contact Cornelia Ashby at (202) 512-7215 or ashbyc@gao.gov.

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.

Adapted Athletics



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