



A School Administrator’s Guide to Physical Education for Students with Disabilities in Special Education

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This document provides information for school administrators and Committee on Special Education (CSE) chairs about physical education for students with disabilities. All special education service delivery is a collaborative team effort and physical education is a required part of these special education services. Topics in this paper include **Legal Requirements, Physical Education and the IEP team, Qualified Teachers, and Assessments**.

Legal Requirements - Physical Education and Special Education

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (P.L. 108-446) defines physical education as a required component of special education for children and youth ages 3-21 who qualify for special education services. The term “special education” means specially designed instruction, at no cost to parents, that meets the unique needs of a child with a disability. This specially designed instruction includes: (a) instruction conducted in the classroom, in the home, in hospitals and institutions, and in other settings; and (b) instruction in physical education (US Department of Education, 2005: §300.26). This physical education requirement has been clarified often by the Office of Special Education Programs within the US DOE through policy clarification letters (include links here to the 4 OSEP letters).

Physical Education is a Direct Service. IDEA delineates physical education (PE) as a direct service, and defines this requirement as instruction in physical fitness; motor fitness; fundamental motor skills and patterns; and skills in aquatics, dance and individual and group games and sports (including intramurals and lifetime sports). Service delivery can take place in a variety of settings, ranging from instruction in the home or hospital to inclusion in a general education class with nondisabled peers. <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/regs/b/b/300.108>
The setting or placement should always be based on a student’s individual needs and be determined by the Individual Education Plan (IEP) team.

Every student receiving special education services must have an IEP that connects to the students disability related need, and the student's 1) functional and academic performance, (2) annual

educational goals, and (3) educational services provided so that they can meet those goals. Specific to PE, a student's IEP must minimally document the present level of academic achievement and functional performance in PE, how the student's disability affects involvement



and performance in general PE in comparison to his or her same age peers, and how the disability affects the student's involvement in and progress in the general PE curriculum. Local Education Agencies (LEAs) must document the student's performance in PE, including specially designed or adapted PE services. This process is similar to any other special education and related service for students with disabilities.

Documentation for PE must be provided within each of the required components of the IEP (e.g., measurable annual goals for APE, statement of APE services to be provided including responsible personnel, and start date for services and anticipated frequency, location and duration of services and modifications). This is accomplished by having specific documentation for PE included within the student's annual IEP just like any other identified special education or related service need.

The General Physical Educator and/or the Adapted Physical Educator Should Serve as Collaborative Members of the IEP team

The physical educators must assist in the determination of (1) eligibility for APE services, (2) the least restrictive environment in which services are provided, and (3) the goals appropriate for that student. **To be clear, adapted or specially designed PE is a required special education service (not a placement or class)** that may be provided in a variety of settings including, but not limited to: the general PE class; a separate APE class; a mixed abilities class.

[Link to NCPEID.](#)

The exclusion of students with disabilities from PE or denial of PE services should never be considered an option. It is important to remember that adapted or specially designed physical education for students with disabilities can also take place in the general physical education setting. With proper training of paraprofessionals and teachers, students can be safe and successful in general physical education while working on physical education IEP goals.

Removing children with disabilities from the general physical education environment should occur only if the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in the regular classes, with the use of supplementary aids and services, cannot be performed safely and successfully for all students. Physical education teachers should work collaboratively with the IEP team to determine appropriate placement. If specially designed physical education instruction is determined by the IEP team, IDEA mandates the inclusion of adapted physical education goals in a child's IEP, as well as statements that describe:

- a. The student's current level of performance, measurable goals and objectives
- b. Placement options available for implementing the education program
- c. Assessment procedures used to determine when the goals and objectives are achieved
- d. The accommodations to be provided so that the student can participate in physical education safely and successfully



Download: OSEP Policy Letter to Tymeson (2021). Replacement of required physical education by other services

OSEP Policy Letter to Tymeson (2013). APE for Individuals 3-5 Year of Age

OSEP Policy Letter to Kelly (2013). APE for Individuals 16-21 Years of Age

Physical Education and the IEP Team

Every student identified with a disability has an IEP team. Collaboration with the IEP team provides a holistic perspective of the student because each service provider has knowledge that contributes to the students' education and well-being. Team members could include the general education classroom and special education teachers, General Physical Education (GPE) teacher, Adapted Physical Education (APE) teacher, case manager, parents, occupational therapist (OT), physical therapist (PT), speech therapists (ST) and other providers as needs (such as a Teacher for the Visually Impaired (TVI) or Teacher of the Deaf (TOD)).

Administrators are also a part of the team. Figure 2.1 provides guidelines for a positive collaborative process. A common APE service delivery model for students with high intensity needs is the Motor Team approach. The team is composed of the APE teacher, PT, OT, ST, and others as appropriate.

Special Considerations for Parents and Administrators

Every child found eligible for testing in the area of APE should be evaluated by an APE specialist for the possible need of specially designed or adapted physical education. Although a child may have an IEP, not all children require APE services. This process should be the same as for any special education need determination. Also, it is important to note that adapted physical education as a direct service can be a stand alone special education service on the IEP.

If a student does not initially qualify for APE services, a referral can be made for such services at any time. The assessment to determine eligibility needs to include a standardized tool that evaluates physical and gross motor performance. The assessor should conduct a file review for background information, student interview to determine interests, collaborate with other educational team members, and use performance data from the students participation in physical education to guide decisions regarding the development of the IEP.

Proper assessment will not only help develop IEP content, but will also provide the means to create meaningful, challenging, and purposeful lesson plans with objectives that will target an individual student's strength, weaknesses, and needs. This will also enable the adapted physical education teacher to monitor student performance towards mastery of IEP physical education goals and report on the program at a frequency indicated on the IEP.



[IEP Checklist: Physical Education Services](#). Use this checklist to make sure the IEP team fully addresses your child's physical education services and placement.

In most cases, the IEP is only for students who qualify for special education services. When a student doesn't qualify for APE but still needs accommodations and modifications in their IEP, it is very common for students with disabilities such as hearing impairments, amputations, mild Cerebral Palsy, etc. to have 504 plans for participation in general physical education.

Teaching Qualifications for Adapted Physical Education

Having appropriately qualified and licensed teachers is key for services for students with disabilities, including instruction in physical education. PE teachers must be prepared to collaborate with other special education and related service professionals to improve student learning; work on instruction policy, curriculum development and staff development; and evaluate school progress and the allocation of resources to meet state and local education objectives.

Some states such as California, Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin have specific teaching endorsements in Adapted Physical Education (APE). If you are located in a state with an add-on APE teaching license, check with your State Department of Education (DOE) to see who is qualified to teach specially designed physical education or Adapted Physical Education. For example, in Michigan, only an Adapted Physical Educator (a Physical Educator who holds that APE endorsement) can teach Adapted Physical Education.

It is common for school districts to hire APE teachers from other states where specialized teacher preparation programs exist. The DOE recognizes the high demand for APE teachers by providing APE Personnel Development grants to universities on a competitive basis.

<https://ncpeid.memberclicks.net/apc-apa-professional-preparation-program-directory>

In states without an APE teaching endorsement, it is critical for school administrators to hire physical education teachers who are committed to knowing each student and implementing the most appropriate PE instruction for their abilities, which includes using diverse instructional strategies to teach for understanding, and multiple methods for measuring student growth, progress, and understanding.

In 1992, in response to the action seminar with the National Association of State Directors of Special Education, the NCPEID, with support from the United States Department of Education, developed the Adapted Physical Education National Standards (APENS) along with a national certification examination that reflects the standards and denotes the skills and knowledge needed by APE teachers to provide quality physical education services to students with disabilities (APENS, 2008; www.apens.org). In states without an add-on APE teaching license, school districts are strongly encouraged to require certification for teachers hired as APE teachers.



Checklist for PE service for students with disabilities in general physical education

1. Is there a school philosophy that supports students with disabilities?
2. Does the school leadership provide training and support for the staff to teach in ways that maximize learning opportunities for all students?
3. Are students being educated in with peers?
4. If not, what criteria were used to make that determination?
5. Is there open communication between the PE/APE teacher and other educators/therapists? (Paraprofessionals, occupational therapists, case managers and speech therapists)
6. Do special and general educators collaborate on ensuring students have access to supports and services? Do they have planning time together?
7. Do students with disabilities have access to the same curriculum as non-disabled students?
8. Does the school district offer reasonable accommodations to intramural and interscholastic sports programs and activities to ensure that students are not being excluded from, denied the benefits of, or subjected to discrimination? Do students participate in equitable school-based extracurricular activities?
9. Does the physical education program provide an accessible curriculum for students with a range of abilities?
10. Do the lessons follow a progression of differentiated instruction?
11. Do students who cannot participate in the district's existing extracurricular athletics program – (even with reasonable modifications) have access to equitable opportunities to receive the benefits of school-based extracurricular athletics (e.g., school-based adapted and disability sport opportunities)?
12. Are community and recreational sports available to students as a way to provide opportunities for physical and social engagement? Does your physical education teacher have knowledge of community-based programs?

Additional Resources

<https://ncpeid.memberclicks.net/>

[Center for Parent Information Resources](#)

[SHAPE America: Answering Frequently Asked Questions about Adapted Physical Education \(August 2016\).](#)

[Office for Civil Rights Dear Colleague Letter](#)

<https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-201301-504.pdf>



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