

### **Providing Community-Based PE Services For Students With Disabilities in Special Education Transition Programs**

Concerned that too many high school students with disabilities are not receiving physical education services, SHAPE America – Society of Health and Physical Educators offers this guidance for providing physical education in community-based settings as part of secondary special education transition programming.

This guidance — including recommended best practices and recommendations for providing community-based physical education (see p. 4) — flows from policy guidance from the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) stating that students with disabilities who are enrolled in community-based transition programs may receive physical education in community-based settings (see p.2).

#### **Background**

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires that schools provide physical education to all students enrolled in special education, as part of their individualized education program (IEP) process, except for those schools that do not offer physical education to any students. IDEA, as reauthorized in 2004, also requires schools and other agencies to develop transition services for secondary-level students enrolled in special education, beginning at age 16 (earlier, if appropriate) and continuing until they graduate from high school or leave the education system. Often, as part of those transition services, students participate in community-based activities (e.g., job training, life skills training) outside of the school building.

When students leave the school building to take part in transition services, they often miss physical education classes, among other classes, and physical education is not always among the community-based services that students receive. Thus, many community-based transition services are not meeting IDEA’s physical education requirement, and many students with disabilities are being denied the health-enhancing benefits of acquiring the skills and knowledge — through high school physical education — they need to lead a physically active lifestyle. Moreover, students who are placed into community settings as early as age 14, which is the case in some states, often miss important physical fitness training that is critical for employment.

#### **Reasons for Concern**

It is well established that the United States is in the midst of a physical inactivity epidemic, which has exacerbated health-related conditions including obesity, cardiovascular disease, metabolic syndrome and diabetes. Physical inactivity and sedentary behaviors increase with age in the

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general population, with 38 percent of the U.S. population reporting no leisure-time physical activity (Dai, et al., 2015).

Unfortunately, that trend exists for Americans living with a disability, with even higher levels of physical inactivity (Bandini, et al, 2015). For example, when researchers studied a cross-sectional group of children with autism spectrum disorder, they found that physical activity declined and sedentary behaviors increased simultaneously with advancing age (MacDonald, Esposito & Ulrich, 2011). Researchers found similar results in a group of children with Down syndrome, who also showed increasing levels of physical inactivity with simultaneous increases in sedentary behaviors (Esposito, MacDonald, Hornyak & Ulrich, 2012). The same trends have been found in children with cerebral palsy (Mitchell, Zivian & Boyd, 2015) and other physical disabilities (Bloemen, et al., 2015).

Clearly, physical activity disparities exist between students with disabilities and those without disabilities, and negative health consequences often ensue. Thus, learning how to be physically active in one's community, under the guidance of highly qualified adapted physical education personnel, is critical to the health of students with disabilities as they progress into adult life and, ultimately, independent living.

SHAPE America created this guide — including the recommendations that begin on p. 4 — so that physical educators can help ensure that students in community-based transition programs do receive physical education services in community settings, and that those services are developed and implemented by certified adapted physical education teachers.

### Clarification From OSEP

In 2013, OSEP's then-director, Melody Musgrove, issued a policy letter clarifying the physical education requirement for students with disabilities participating in community-based transition programs, which states, in part:

Your letter states that the placement for some students with IEPs ages 18-21 is a community-based transition program. The Department's long-standing position is that placement refers to the provision of special education and related services rather than a specific place, such as a specific classroom or specific school. 71 Fed. Reg. 46540, 46687 (August 14, 2006). Neither the statute nor 34 CFR §300.108 distinguish between the potential locations, i.e., a high school setting or a community-based transition program, where a student with physical education on his or her IEP should receive it. We believe that the placement decision is best left to the team that determines the educational placement, under 34 CFR §300.327, of the student with a disability. (Policy letter to Luke F. Kelly, October 23, 2013)

Musgrove's response, based on regulations resulting from Congress's reauthorization and expansion of IDEA in 2004, reiterates the law's physical education requirement for students in special education transition programs and states that physical education does not necessarily have to occur in a gymnasium or a school building; the law's focus is on the service itself, not the location in which it is delivered.

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Despite that clarification from OSEP, however, confusion over this issue still causes some students with disabilities to go without the physical education they are guaranteed, thus denying them the opportunity to learn about and enjoy the health-enhancing benefits of a physically active lifestyle.

### Conclusion

Key factors for individuals with disabilities making a successful transition from secondary education to college, career and a fulfilling life are their health, fitness and wellness. The skills needed to be physically active within their community are critical. Thus, the most appropriate physical education setting for young adults receiving special education transition services is in a community-based setting, and such programs should be implemented by a highly qualified adapted physical educator.

### Call to Action

Physical educators should lead the effort to ensure that students in community-based secondary transition programs receive physical education services in community settings, and that those services are developed and implemented by certified adapted physical education teachers.

As part of that effort, physical educators should inform stakeholders about the benefits of physical activity, the significant disparities in lifelong physical activity that exist between individuals with disabilities and their peers without disabilities, the critical need for students with disabilities to learn how to be physically active after they graduate from high school and the support available from OSEP. That will help ensure that physical education is included in all transition programs as part of a student's IEP, as well as improving efforts to develop meaningful physical education and physical activity programs for successful secondary special education transitions.

Moreover, physical educators should take steps to ensure that all stakeholders understand that the benefits of a healthful, physically active lifestyle include enhanced community and social integration, competitive and integrated employment, and increased independent living within the community.

SHAPE America, through its state affiliates and its professional and national partner groups, is poised to assist physical educators in informing stakeholders about the benefits of appropriate physical activity during secondary transition programs through the dissemination of established best practices and shared interpretation of federal regulations, including letters of clarification from OSEP.

As part of that effort, SHAPE America offers recommendations for providing physical education services in community settings, beginning on the next page.

## **Best Practices and Recommendations for Providing Meaningful Physical Education Services in Secondary Special Education Transition Programs**

Physical education transition-service program planning is a comprehensive process that requires stakeholders to consider students' individual functioning, as well as possible barriers and facilitators in the environment into which the students are transitioning. SHAPE America recommends the following best practices as guidelines for developing and implementing meaningful physical education in special education transition programs. SHAPE America also recommends that these practices be implanted by highly qualified adapted physical educators.

### **Use authentic settings in the community.**

Sites such as YMCAs, fitness clubs, municipal parks and recreation programs, and other community-based settings offer “real world” settings in which students likely will be spending time after graduating from or leaving school. As a part of this use of authentic settings, transition teams should include staff members from these community facilities and programs in all aspects of planning, implementing and evaluating the experience. Staff members from host community-based sites are key to promoting physical activity among students with disabilities.

### **Include parents and other family members early and often in the transition planning process.**

Parents often are the primary source of support (e.g., financial, transportation) for students with disabilities in transition programs and, as such, they have a major impact on students' physical activity participation after school-based transitioning has ended. It's important to involve parents in the process by sharing information with them at IEP meetings regarding the shift from structured physical education to community-based physical activity concepts. Parents also should take part in transition activities to educate them about appropriate activities, equipment and other considerations.

### **Document the specifics of physical education in the IEP during transition.**

Transition teams should document in each student's IEP the physical education content that the student receives, along with all other special education and related services. Such documentation should include statements about the frequency, duration and location of the physical education services; the student's present level of performance; support and accommodations needed to participate in the physical education service; measurable IEP goals and objectives in relation to the physical education provided; and periodic evaluation and reporting of the student's progress toward those goals and objectives.

Here is an example of such documentation regarding a student's participation in physical education at a community-based facility: “By December 20, given verbal prompts by the adapted physical education specialist when exiting the bus in front of the YMCA, Andrea will enter the building independently using her swipe card, locate and enter the locker room, change into her exercise clothes, and walk to the exercise station where treadmills are located for three consecutive class sessions, as assessed with the YMCA physical education rubric.”

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### Teach independence as much as possible.

Preparing young adults for independent living — including participating in physical activity — is an important aspect of transition services. Learning skills such as arranging for transportation, maintaining proper hygiene, dressing oneself and communicating with people, as well as other skills, is essential if students are to participate in physical activity within a community setting as adults.

### Choose content carefully for realistic lifelong physical activity.

Selection of the physical education content to be prescribed in a student's transition should include consideration of what form of activity the student is most likely to pursue over the ensuing 10 to 15 years, not necessarily what form of activity the student is interested in at the present. As with most adults, for example, it's more likely that a student with disabilities will gravitate toward individual-performance activities such as personal fitness, walking, hiking, golf or snowshoeing, just to name a few, than toward group sports such as basketball or baseball. So, to gear the physical education content toward each student's pursuit of lifelong activity, it's best to discuss the matter with each student and his or her family, perhaps after surveying local community facilities and programs regarding what they offer.

### Individualize the program.

Each student has his or her preferences when it comes to physical activity, and a variety of other individual factors, including type and severity of disability, affect the kind of activity that he or she pursues. So, as with IEP goals in other special education and related services, each student's physical education transition goals should meet his or her individual needs. To ensure that, the adapted physical education specialist should talk with each student, and his or her parents, teachers, secondary transition coordinators, community staff and others who interact with the student about how to meet those individual needs when it comes to physical education and learning how to remain physically active after leaving school.

### Appoint qualified physical education staff to lead the transition.

Because physical education is a required special education service, a qualified and experienced staff member — preferably, an adapted physical education teacher who is familiar with the student's abilities and preferences after years of mutual interaction — should lead the development of transition-based physical education services. Special education teachers, adapted physical activity specialists, paraeducators, parents and others also can provide valuable assistance.

### Include related agencies and staff in transition-based physical education.

In addition to working with staff members from physical activity sites such as YMCAs and other community facilities, adapted physical education teachers who lead students' transition-based physical education services should involve adapted physical activity professionals and staff members from public health, social services, job training and other agencies who will be involved with students after they leave the education system. They can help ensure that the transition program equips students with the physical skills needed to perform certain jobs, teaches them how to apply for facility memberships (and how to pay membership fees), as well as other activity-related life skills.

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### Implement an environmental approach to planning physical education during transition.

An environmental approach to planning begins with determining goals and objectives for the critical skills that students will need to have for them to succeed in environments outside of school. Goals should reflect student needs; student, family and peer interests; available facilities and programs; supports needed; and the time they have available for physical activity.

Then, taking an inventory of the student's environment and sub-environment will help determine when and where the student can work on the goals, what, if any, modifications and support are needed, and can help prepare staff members and support personnel for assisting the student.

For example, for Andrea, the student mentioned earlier, such an inventory would help the transition team analyze the steps that Andrea followed and how she performs in each sub-environment of the YMCA (e.g., front desk, locker room, weight machines, treadmill, track). This process helps the transition team determine suggestions for modifications, support and other assistance (e.g., verbal cues, picture schedule, physical assistance from a staff member) necessary for Andrea to participate successfully in the physical activity she's chosen.

### Collaborate with others to include nutrition education as part of a healthy, active lifestyle.

As young adults enter life after school, the health-enhancing benefits of physical activity often give way to a sedentary lifestyle, lack of structured physical activity, access to unhealthy food options and poor diet. Nutrition and health education curricula, led by certified health education teachers, should form an important component of students' transition plans to ensure that they are prepared with the skills and knowledge necessary to maintain and enhance wellness.

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### Additional Resources

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