

DAY 1 CHECKLIST

HOW TO COACH AND SUPPORT ATHLETES WITH PHYSICAL DISABILITIES

The following information is to help empower student-athletes with physical disabilities or visual impairments.





SPORT FOR ALL

As is the case with any athlete, it is important to work with the individual, and not the diagnosis, as each disability can present differently and have different opportunities for adaptation. Individual communication and reasonable accommodations are the keys to successful inclusion of students with disabilities.

While the [Special Olympics and Special Recreation Organizations](#) are invaluable champions for athletes with *intellectual disabilities*, **the checklists below are focused on supporting student-athletes with physical disabilities and visual impairments.**

When it comes to high school sports, the rules of engagement for athletes with disabilities may vary from state to state. Each individual state's High School Sports Association sets the guidelines.

In 2013, the [Department of Education issued an advisory letter](#), clarifying schools obligations— *“that access to, and participation in, extracurricular athletic opportunities provides important health and social benefits to all students, particularly those with disabilities. Also - that a school district that offers extracurricular athletics must do so in such manner as is necessary to afford qualified students with disabilities an equal opportunity for participation.”*

The following checklists are to help equip and empower athletic directors, coaches, PE teachers, teammates, and families with the information they need to create an inclusive environment where every athlete can thrive in high school sports.

There are two important checklists in this document to ensure you're building an inclusive and supportive environment for student-athletes with physical disabilities and visual impairments:

Communicating with & Empowering Student-Athletes with Disabilities

- Engaging with Your Student-Athlete with a Disability
- Creating an Inclusive Environment with Teammates
- The Vital Role of Families/Parents in Supporting Student-Athletes with Disabilities

Sourcing Equipment to Support Athletes with Disabilities

- Acquiring Adaptive Equipment
- Funding for Adaptive Equipment





COMMUNICATING WITH & EMPOWERING STUDENT-ATHLETES WITH DISABILITIES

Establishing open communication with student-athletes with disabilities and their families is critical to be able to bring out the best in that athlete. Below are additional tips to help assure that all students' needs, abilities, and required accommodations are valued and supported.

GETTING TO KNOW YOUR STUDENT-ATHLETE WITH A DISABILITY

- ❑ Introduce yourself as a coach or athletic director, emphasizing a warm welcome and expressing your enthusiasm to work with that athlete, as you would any other athlete. Make it clear that this is a collaborative partnership in helping them achieve their sports goals.
- ❑ Never assume that a student with a disability cannot participate in an activity. Help develop self-advocacy skills and encourage them to confidently communicate their needs. Implement principles of Universal Design in practice and training.
- ❑ Engage in meaningful conversations by taking the time to ask about their interests and needs. Many students with disabilities may not be aware of the opportunities available. It is crucial to establish a two-way relationship between the coach and the student, starting from where the student is.
- ❑ Give the student-athlete a voice in their involvement and participation by empowering student-athletes to advocate for themselves and encourage them to speak up and express their individual needs and preferences.
- ❑ Ask the student-athlete and their guardian if they would like you to be incorporated with the students' care team. Their input and expertise can be invaluable in creating a supportive environment for the student.
- ❑ Recognize the uniqueness of each student by avoiding generalizations about what individuals with disabilities can or cannot do. Every person with a disability is unique, and it is essential to understand individual needs and capabilities.
- ❑ Inform the student-athlete about the various opportunities available. In the school environment, individual sports such as track and field, swimming, and tennis may be more accessible for students with physical disabilities (but not always).
- ❑ Adaptive and inclusive sports are both viable ways to offer participation. Inclusive sport is where students with disabilities participate alongside students without disabilities, sometimes with reasonable modifications. Adaptive sport refers to a specific adaptive team or division where athletes compete against each other.
 - **Inclusive Example:** an athlete with an arm amputation competes on the school team but is exempt from a two-handed touch rule.
 - **Adaptive Example:** a wheelchair division on the track team or a wheelchair basketball program.
- ❑ Provide inclusive opportunities for all students, offering different levels of activities to cater to the diverse needs, coordination, strength, and cardio levels of all students, including those with disabilities.
- ❑ Build a program— start small. In the past there has been low expectations when it comes to adaptive sport in schools with little or none being historically provided. Momentum and commitment is needed to build awareness and participation. Be a leader by starting adaptive sport opportunities for a few and help drive a movement.
- ❑ Promote creativity and inclusivity by researching adaptive sports rules, equipment and reasonable accommodations. While it might be instinctive to first look at all of the ways in which a program isn't accessible, instead look at what minimum adaptations can be made to ensure the needs of adaptive athletes are met.
- ❑ If a student shows interest in adaptive sports that the school cannot provide, assist them in finding local resources to support their aspirations. The United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee and Move United has comprehensive resource guides to [direct students to adaptive sports organizations in their area](#).



CREATING AN INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENT WITH TEAMMATES

Teammates are crucial in fostering a culture of natural inclusion for students with disabilities. As a teacher or coach, your leadership sets the tone for the entire team, both on and off the field.

- ❑ To create an inclusive environment, it is important to establish clear expectations and core values right from the start of the season. By defining your team's shared commitment to integrity, teamwork, and respect, you can create a solid foundation for everyone to thrive.
- ❑ It is also important to communicate with all team members that the impact of one's actions extends beyond the gym or sport. The goal is to clearly establish and embrace inclusion with the expectations that all athletes on your team will mirror back this example, promoting acceptance and understanding in all aspects of life.
- ❑ Here are some practical examples of inclusive and adaptive practices in your sport program.
 - Designate a lane for wheelchair athletes to practice at the same time as the entire team.
 - Allow swim athletes to enter the pool before the start.
 - Collaborate with a local wheelchair basketball team for equipment, coaching, or competition.
 - Add a parallel sitting volleyball team to the program.
 - Allow runners with a prosthetic to use a modified starting block or arm bolster.
 - Use additional starting signals or cues (flags/ lights) if requested.
 - Allow athletes with visual impairments to use a sighted guide, tether, or lane caller.
 - Play tennis using the two bounce rule.

Visit [Move United](#) to learn more.

THE VITAL ROLE OF FAMILIES/PARENTS IN SUPPORTING STUDENT-ATHLETES WITH DISABILITIES

It is important for the athletic director and the coach to have an open dialogue with families of student-athletes with disabilities to best meet the needs of that student-athlete.

- ❑ The coach or athletic director can communicate to the family that every student, regardless of their abilities, has the opportunity to participate and pursue their goals in sports. The mission statement serves as a strong reminder of the schools' commitment to inclusivity.
- ❑ Encourage a collaborative team approach to support the overall development and success of their student-athlete. This can involve close coordination between parents, coaches, the child's care-team and therapists (upon approval and alignment with the family), as well as adaptive sports advisors.
- ❑ Encourage open discussions between parents and their student-athlete on the importance of self-advocacy and effective communication with coaches and teachers. By practicing talking points, parents can help their athletes develop confidence and comfort in initiating conversations.
- ❑ Every sport should hold a team meeting with all parents and athletes at the start of the year or season. This is the perfect platform to address important matters such as code of conduct, expectations, playtime, grades, and practices. Additional one-on-one meetings with the coach and families/athlete may also be beneficial to discuss any modifications needed for training. If the athlete is already training with a local adaptive club, they may also be utilized.

During these sessions, emphasize the essential role that every athlete plays in the team. It is crucial to avoid singling out students based on their disabilities, and instead, emphasize the entire athletic department's mission around inclusivity and acceptance for all.
- ❑ Emphasize to your student-athletes and families on the team that while reasonable accommodations and adaptations are part of your program, all other athletes expectations are the same - promoting true inclusivity (i.e. athlete attendance and maintaining grades).
- ❑ Let parents and student-athletes with disabilities know that there are colleges which offer inclusive and adaptive para-sports programs.



SOURCING EQUIPMENT TO SUPPORT ATHLETES WITH DISABILITIES

When it comes to empowering students with disabilities to participate in sports, one of the main challenges they face is accessing the necessary adaptive equipment.

- ❑ Athletic directors, coaches, and PE teachers can take the first step towards acquiring this equipment by [reaching out to their local adaptive sports or community organizations](#), which can be found on the Move United website directory. These organizations can provide assistance on how to include student-athletes with disabilities, provide valuable guidance on training techniques, equipment adaptations, rules and drills, and even lend the necessary equipment when needed.

- ❑ There are funding opportunities available for students with disabilities to secure adaptive sports equipment including:
 - **Challenged Athletes Foundation:**
<https://www.challengedathletes.org/grants/>
 - **High Fives Foundation:**
<https://highfivesfoundation.org/grant-application/>
 - **IM ABLE Foundation:**
<https://imablefoundation.org/programs/>
 - **Kelly Brush Foundation:**
<https://kellybrushfoundation.org/theactivefund/>
 - **Move United:**
<https://moveunitedsport.org/>
 - **SCORE:**
<https://scorefund.org/applying-for-a-grant/>





WHERE TO TURN FOR RESOURCES & SUPPORT

The resources available for athletic directors and coaches to turn to support their student-athletes with disabilities are as vast and expansive as the opportunities awaiting these athletes.

- ❑ **Move United**, a national governing body for adaptive sports [features a local chapter locator](#) that allows athletic directors and coaches to find adaptive sports organizations in their area by simply entering their state. Each local or state chapter can provide physical education teachers and coaches with ideas for adapting activities, offer equipment loans for specific sports (i.e. track wheelchairs, sports wheelchairs, handcycles, etc.), and provide education on the specific rules of various sports.

- ❑ In addition to Move United, high school sports associations within each state offer resources for engagement with student-athletes with disabilities, including rules for competition and athlete recognition.

- ❑ The national governing bodies for individual sports also provide information on adaptations and regulations within their respective sports including:
 - [International Paralympic Committee](#)
 - [National Wheelchair Basketball Association](#)
 - [United Spinal Cord Association](#)
 - [US Tennis Association](#)

- ❑ **The American Association of Adapted Sports Programs (AAASP)** provides education, assistance, and information to schools and community programs on integrating and developing adapted sports programs in schools including training programs for coaches and officials, rulebooks specific to adapted sports competition (such as wheelchair basketball and wheelchair football), as well as drills, skills training, and information on students' rights to access adapted sports programs. The United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee (USOPC) also provides specific resources for [finding adaptive sports clubs by state](#) and offers [para-sport guides](#) with rules and training outlines for individual sports.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Below are links to support students with disabilities, adapt individual physical education curricula, and access rules and training ideas for adaptive sports. These resources serve as valuable tools to ensure that every student has the opportunity to thrive.

Adapted Physical Education, PE Central:

<https://www.pecentral.org/adapted/adaptedmenu.html>

Move United Adaptive Sports - Rules, Adaptations:

<https://moveunitedsport.org/sports/adaptive-sports>

Athlete, Coach and Parent Information and Resources:

<https://www.usopc.org/paralympic-resources>

Development of Paralympic Swimming - Move United:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l6GNELY_lyU

Para-Sport Guides with Rules, Club Links:

<https://www.usopc.org/paralympic-sport-guide>

The Challenged Athletes Foundation High School Track and Field Program:

<https://www.challengedathletes.org/hsadaptivesports/>

National Federation of State High School Associations Coaching Adapted Sports Course:

<https://nfhslearn.com/courses/coaching-adapted-sports>

Move United Sanctioned Competitions:

<https://moveunitedsport.org/events/sanctioned-competitions>

List of Collegiate Adaptive Sport Programs

<https://www.challengedathletes.org/collegiate-adaptive-sports>

The United States Association of Blind Athletes:

<https://www.usaba.org>

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