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**New Guidance Will Enhance Sports Opportunities for Students with Disabilities
Inclusive Fitness Coalition compares impact to Title IX**

WASHINGTON – Students with disabilities have reason to celebrate as they gain some headway in their fight for better, health, and greater participation in school activities. The Inclusive Fitness Coalition (IFC) and student athletes with disabilities all over the country today applauded guidance issued by the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights (OCR).¹ The guidance clarifies schools’ responsibilities under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Rehab Act) to provide athletic opportunities for students with disabilities.

The 2013 Dear Colleague Letter requires a holistic approach by schools seeking to comply with the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and ensures that schools look broadly and proactively to include students with disabilities in athletic programs in order to satisfy the school’s civil rights obligations to provide equal educational opportunities. The policies apply to **all levels of education**, including both interscholastic and intercollegiate athletic opportunities.

The benefits of providing all students opportunities for exercise and sports participation go beyond justice and individual opportunity. “Inclusion in athletics is how children learn from each other, build social skills and optimize their growth and development. The OCR guidance is a clear indication that athletics is an extremely important part of our educational system and that youth and young adults with disabilities must be afforded the same opportunities as their non-disabled peers,” said James Rimmer, Ph.D., who co-chairs the Inclusive Fitness Coalition and directs the National Center on Health, Physical Activity and Disability. “This should be part of a national strategy to lower obesity rates, which are disproportionately higher among youth with disabilities compared to their non-disabled peers.”

GAO study called for guidance

¹ <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-201301-504.html>

The guidance followed a 2010 study from the Government Accountability Office² that found that students with disabilities receive fewer opportunities for physical activity and sports participation than students without disabilities. To help close the gap, the GAO called on the Department of Education to provide resources to assist states and schools in serving students with disabilities in physical activity settings. The GAO report also called for clarification of schools' responsibilities to provide athletic opportunities for students under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. The Inclusive Fitness Coalition called for the GAO study, working with Sen. Tom Harkin (D-IA) and Reps. Chris Van Hollen (D-MD), Carolyn McCarthy (D-NY) and George Miller (D-CA).

Advocates Invoke Title IX

"OCR's guidance is a landmark moment for individuals with disabilities, as it sends a loud message to educational institutions that students with disabilities must be provided opportunities for physical activity and sports equal to those afforded to students without disabilities," said Terri Lakowski, policy chair of the Inclusive Fitness Coalition and nationally recognized sports policy advocate. Lakowski, who has been a champion of equal physical activity and sports opportunities for women and girls under Title IX as well as students with disabilities for over ten years, added, "We applaud OCR for its leadership and action, which we hope will pave the way for students with disabilities in sports the same way that Title IX has done for women."

James R. Whitehead, CEO of the American College of Sports Medicine and co-chair of the Inclusive Fitness Coalition, said, "Athletes with physical disabilities shone on the world stage at the Paralympic Games in London. These important steps taken to provide further guidance will help ensure that tomorrow's world-class athletes find their way to sports in schools across our country like never before. The benefit of sport transcends that world stage; these athletes demonstrate that regular physical activity can have a positive impact on so many aspects of a young person's life."

This guidance opens the door for the vast expansion of opportunities for students with disabilities to participate in sports and physical activity programs in all levels of education. Beverly Vaughn, Executive Director of the American Association of Adapted Sports Programs, who has developed and implemented a school-based model for disability sport says, "We are ready and eager to work with schools across the country and show them that integrating students with disabilities into school athletic programs is not only feasible, but will greatly enrich the overall athletic experience for all students."

-30-

About IncFit

The IFC, led by the Lakeshore Foundation in partnership with the American College of Sports Medicine, comprises 200 organizations representing a cross-section of the disability rights, sports, health/fitness and civil rights communities. Recognizing the barriers that continue to limit opportunities for physical activity for individuals with disabilities in the school setting, the IFC works to expand opportunities for physical activity, exercise and athletics for individuals with disabilities. For more information, please visit www.Lakeshore.org.

² <http://www.gao.gov/assets/310/305775.html>