

Study: Fewer than half of K-12 PE teachers use high-quality instruction with disabled students

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Fewer than half of K-12 physical educators teaching students with disabilities report using high-quality instruction practices, such as

modified instructions or equipment, to fully accommodate those students, a recent study from Oregon State University shows.

The majority of teachers surveyed were considered highly qualified, with 75% holding undergraduate degrees in [physical education](#) and 49% holding graduate degrees, most in fields related to health and [physical education](#).

"I think the important thing here is that training matters, and there's still a lot of room for improvement when it comes to physical educators serving students with disabilities," said Sam Logan, co-author on the study and an associate professor in OSU's College of Public Health and Human Sciences. Logan studies kinesiology and adaptive movement, with a focus on [young children](#) with disabilities.

For the study, researchers used [survey data](#) from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on 758 physical educators working in K-12 public schools nationwide. Of the total sample, about 34% reported teaching students with "long-term physical, medical or cognitive disabilities" in their PE classes.

The survey asked teachers if they used any of six general practices for ensuring high-quality education for disabled students. Researchers determined that teachers must employ all six practices listed in the survey to achieve "high-quality" instruction. The practices included varying the level of difficulty in the material taught; allowing more skill modeling, [practice](#) or repetition; and modifying the equipment or facilities.

Participants were only considered to provide high-quality instructional practices if they answered yes to all six. Of the 256 teachers who reported teaching disabled students, only 122 (which is 48%) said they used all six practices. Teachers with an education-related degree,

including physical education and health education, were more likely to use these practices than teachers with non-education-related degrees.

The study noted that most physical education [teacher](#) education programs offer only one course in adapted physical education, and that course must cover a range of topics, including disability definitions, appropriate teaching strategies and creating modifications. Researchers say it's likely that alternate certificate programs, whereby individuals can become teachers without receiving a teaching degree, provide even less specific instruction on adaptive physical education.

When educators don't employ specific strategies to make PE accessible for students with disabilities, those students often end up sitting on the sidelines, Logan said.

"I don't suspect that it's an individual-level behavior that they're purposefully excluding children with disabilities, but it's a lack of training and confidence in strategies to include children with disabilities," he said.

Through his work with [IMPACT](#), a motor skills fitness program for disabled children at OSU, Logan sees dozens of kids with mobility and other challenges fully engaged in physical activity every week.

"Obviously you have to meet these students with [disabilities](#) where they are, but also the opportunities to engage in physical education should be provided," he said. "There's a lot of research about the link between motor development and lifelong physical activity, and the importance of fundamental motor skill development in young children especially. A lot of the skills you learn in elementary school carry throughout life."

As an example, Logan said, if students in a PE class are meant to be throwing a ball at a target to learn accuracy, teachers could set up

multiple targets of varying size to meet the varying needs of students. Or if they're working on catching, some students may need to toss a beach ball instead of a tennis ball, as it's easier to catch with two hands, and the surface of the ball gives with pressure.

PE doesn't have to cater solely to non-disabled students, and modifying a task or game to be more accessible for everyone can be a teaching moment too, Logan said.

"It's really about modifying the task, the equipment or the rules to align with a person's disability," he said. "There are many different levels of goals that can be achieved through physical education, and whatever means necessary it takes to have equitable practice is the important piece."

More information: Jaehun Jung et al, Physical Educators' Qualifications and Instructional Practices Toward Students With Disabilities, *Adapted Physical Activity Quarterly* (2022). [DOI: 10.1123/apaq.2021-0117](https://doi.org/10.1123/apaq.2021-0117)

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