

Addressing Best Practices In Education-Based Athletics for Students with Physical Disabilities Through Interscholastic Adapted Team Sports



Provided by:

American Association of Adapted Sports Programs
National Federation of State High School Associations
National Interscholastic Athletic Administrators Association

BEST PRACTICES FOR SCHOOL BASED ADAPTED TEAM SPORTS

The American Association of Adapted Sports Programs (AAASP), The National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) and the National Interscholastic Athletic Administrators Association (NIAAA) submit the following:

“Addressing Best Practices In Education-Based Athletics for Students with Physical Disabilities Through Interscholastic Adapted Team Sports”

This best practices document is the result of over 20 years of practitioner experiences within the AAASP adaptedSPORTS® programs, a model program promoting fully integrated, compliant and accessible athletic offerings in grades 1-12 at school. The athletes served through these programs represent over forty varying physical disability types.

Additional review and input includes the contributions of teachers, school administrators, school board members, special education and school athletic personnel.

Among the professionals contributing to these practices are world-class Paralympic coaches and athletes, disability sport experts, therapeutic recreation specialists, physical and occupational therapists, researchers and collegiate educators responsible for imparting best practices to students and other professionals in education, sport management, PE and adapted PE. An integral part of this educational initiative includes legal professionals, insurance experts, classroom and itinerant teachers working with students with orthopedic impairments, as well as 504 coordinators. Traditional coaches, athletic directors, game officials, state high school athletic association executives and state departments of education staff have also proven instrumental. All continue to play a vital role in helping our efforts to shape inclusive policies and programs for this underserved student population. Local school transportation departments have also provided input on some of the recommendations regarding the geographic placement of programs (within the recommended Needs Assessment).

We extend our sincere thanks to these contributors. Through our collective desire to serve those with disabilities, we have enhanced the efforts and outcomes of all.

Thank you!



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1. INTRODUCTION

The information contained in this document is intended to provide school administrators and educators with best practices for including adapted team sports for students with physical disabilities within a public school system's existing athletic structure.

The best practices are designed to assist schools with creating sustainable opportunities for students with physical disabilities to take part in school sports in an equitable manner as their non-disabled peers.

Some states and schools have successfully demonstrated that it is reasonable to offer sanctioned adapted team sports for students with physical disabilities both at the state and local school system level without creating an undue administrative burden for schools or requiring changes to existing rules for non-disabled athletes.

These types of opportunities exist for individuals with physical disabilities at the regional, national, and international level, but are not as commonly available at the local school level. Since the release of the 2013 OCR guidelines clarifying the schools role in providing athletic opportunity for students with disabilities, there has been a concerted effort by key education groups to address this issue.

It is important to note that Adapted Sport student athletes are ineligible for Special Olympics and Unified Sports as these programs are designed specifically to meet the needs of the intellectually disabled or cognitively impaired, rather than the physically disabled.

School district teams who have competed in over 1700 interscholastic adapted sports competitions in the past five years or more, with demonstrated evidence-based outcomes, have employed the best practices described in this document.

2. ADAPTED SPORTS

2.1 Terminology

Disability sport terminology has been used as a term encompassing sport related to individuals with disabilities. However, adapted sports terminology is preferred for the following reasons: It is consistent with terminology in adapted physical education and adapted physical activity; it focuses on the modification of sport rather than on disability; it encourages participation in the most normal and integrated environment; it is consistent with normalization theory; it promotes the creation of sport opportunities; and it provides an opportunity for the pursuit of excellence in sport through a full spectrum of settings for participation. (Winnick, 2005)¹

¹ Winnick, J. (2005). Adapted Physical Education and Sport (6th ed.). Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics

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2.2 Student Eligibility

To identify eligible students for adapted team sports, consider students enrolled in General Education or Special Education classes in elementary, middle and high school who have an orthopedic impairment as defined under the federal law *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA). Examples of the types of disabilities students may have include cerebral palsy, spina bifida, spinal cord injury, amputee, muscular dystrophy, osteogenesis imperfecta, traumatic brain injury, and other physical disorders. Secondary disabilities may be present, including, but not limited to, visual, hearing, or communication impairments. Special Education students who are over the age of 18, yet still enrolled in 12th grade, are allowed to participate. Students must maintain passing grades or adhere to their IEP goals and submit an annual physical.² Students who are eligible for adapted sports will have some type of disability, other than intellectual, that prevents them from taking part in traditional school sports.

Grades	Disability	Mobility	Students	Teams
Elementary	Physical	Manual wheelchair	Enrolled in school	Registered
Middle	Sensory	Power wheelchair	Annual physical	Submit all forms
High school	Neuro-muscular	Assistive devices	No pass-no play	Coaches training
	Other qualifying medical condition	Ambulatory All students play in w/c	IEP-on track with goals	Adhere to rules/policies

3. CHALLENGES FOR EDUCATORS

3.1 Lack of Awareness

Students with physical disabilities may be unaware they can take part in school sports. Additionally, educators are likely to discover that these students, regardless of their age or grade level, have never taken part in school sports or any sport for that matter. If this is the case, it does not necessarily mean they have no interest in doing so. To overcome this challenge, teachers and coaches should take a proactive approach in identifying and encouraging students to participate. Below is a sample parent letter that may be used to send to parents of children with physical disabilities who are eligible for adapted sports. The letter provides helpful information for parents.

² American Association of Adapted Sports Programs, Policies and Procedures, Sections 4 & 5

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FOR USE ON DISTRICT LETTERHEAD SAMPLE PARENT LETTER³

Date _____

Dear Parent or Guardian,

With the current school year underway, I wanted to take this opportunity to invite your child to participate in _____ County School System's Adapted Sports Program. This is an interscholastic athletic program and offers students attending grades 1-12, who have a physical impairment, the opportunity to participate in competitive adapted sports to assist in fostering a positive educational experience. Student athletes participating in this program often experience improvements in achievement, academic performance and physical development.

The sports that are offered include wheelchair handball, wheelchair basketball, power soccer, and wheelchair football (be sure to list here ONLY the sports your district(s) are offering).

Enclosed is a registration packet along with information on the season dates. (You may elect to insert the following paragraph if your school system is providing transportation):

_____ County School System offers transportation to practices and games on an "as-needed" basis to participants. This service is available to those who are unable to provide transportation for their child. In most instances, we will be able to accommodate your request; however, due to a limited number of buses and certain time constraints, we cannot guarantee this service. In situations where schools are closed or dismissed early, there will be no practice or game on that day.

To register your child for adapted sports complete the attached registration forms. On page 2 of the registration packet, place a check mark next to the sport(s) your child would like to participate in. The registration forms apply to all the sports that are listed, so once these forms are completed and turned in, you will not need to register your child for each sport. Each student must have a completed physical from a physician approving participation in the sports program each year. If your child does not have approval from a physician, they will be ineligible to participate in the adaptedSPORTS® program. Physicals are due on a yearly basis and must be completed by a physician and submitted no later than the first scheduled practice.

Please submit your child's completed registration packet no later than _____, 20____.

If you have questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me at _____.

³ The sample parent letter is from the American Association of Adapted Sports Programs website under member area, administrative tools

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BEST PRACTICE

Be proactive in identifying and encouraging students to participate

3.2 Confusion About Programs

There may also be a lack of awareness regarding the difference in sport offerings for students with intellectual disabilities and those with physical disabilities. Many believe Special Olympics and Unified Sports serve individuals with all types of disabilities. However this is not the case. **Under the Special Olympics eligibility rule, persons, whose functional limitations are based solely on a physical, behavioral, or emotional disability, or a specific learning or sensory disability, are not eligible to participate as Special Olympics athletes.**⁴ This is an important distinction for educators to be aware of when sharing information about athletic opportunities with parents and students. Include information about the program on the school system's website under Athletics⁵ and inform teachers of the program differences during faculty meetings, coaches meetings, staff development, and other appropriate forums.

BEST PRACTICE

Provide clarifying information system wide on which students are eligible for Special Olympics and which are eligible for Adapted Sports through the Special Education Department, the 504 Coordinator, and the Athletic Department communication channels

3.3 Creating Inclusive Opportunities

Schools and states are expanding their view and methods of providing appropriate and equal opportunities in extracurricular athletics for students with physical disabilities, by including adapted team sports as part of the school district's extracurricular athletic offerings. The reason the programs are inclusive is because children with physical disabilities are part of their school district team, competing against other school district teams. Adapted sports teams adhere to standardized seasons, regular and post season competition; published rules of play, policies, procedures, regulations and safety guidelines, just as school sports teams do for non-disabled students.

⁴ Special Olympics Official General Rules, Article 2, Section 2.01 (d) (3)

⁵ <http://schoolwires.henry.k12.ga.us/Page/139>

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Teachers report the program creates an atmosphere for student athletes with physical disabilities to achieve improvements in their physical development, and academic performance, while teaching fundamental skills, teamwork, strategy, and concepts of sport participation, which relate back to the students performance in the classroom.⁶ Creating an inclusive education environment for children with physical disabilities in Athletics can be achieved by incorporating an adapted sport (such as wheelchair basketball) in the school districts' extracurricular athletic offerings. Coaches report participating students are viewed as athletes and their classmates, friends, teachers, parents, and siblings attend their games. Sport, including adapted sport, can play a key role in developing a student's independence, socialization, inclusion, teamwork, and empowerment. Children participating on school adapted sport teams perceive themselves as having lots of friends, getting along with children their age, and being easy to like. They see their sport friendships as providing positive and self-enhancing benefits (e.g., loyalty, intimacy, supportiveness, and self-esteem; Shapiro & Martin, 2009).⁷

BEST PRACTICE

Offer adapted team sports as part of the school district's extracurricular athletic activities to ensure students with physical disabilities have an opportunity to take part in an inclusive program

3.4 Location of Eligible Students

Students with physical disabilities may be enrolled in schools across the district. Educators may only see one student with a physical disability in their school and draw the conclusion that there are not enough students to form a team. However, it is possible and reasonable to form adapted sports teams utilizing a district-wide approach. A school located in the central part of the district may serve as the host venue for the district adapted sports team. For school districts located in more rural areas, a group of districts may elect to cooperate in forming teams. In some cases, only individualized participation may be available, as in wheelchair track and field, due to their location.

⁶ Phillips, M. (2010). Gwinnett County Public Schools Gwinnett Heat Video

⁷ Shapiro, D. R., & Martin J.J. (2010). Athletic identity, affect and peer relations in youth athletes with physical disabilities. *Disability and Health Journal*, 3, 79-85.

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BEST PRACTICE

Utilize a district-wide approach to form a team or teams and a centralized school(s) to serve as the host venue for the adapted sports team(s)

To assist with identifying which students have qualifying physical disabilities for adapted sports, survey all schools in the district from elementary to high school. This questionnaire can be sent to school Principals by way of a joint memo from the Athletic Director and Special Education Director, explaining the intent to identify students with physical disabilities in their schools who may be eligible for the district's adapted sports team(s). There may be some schools that have one or more eligible students and some schools who have none. From this information, it can be determined if there are enough students to form a team or teams. For example, in wheelchair basketball, five students are needed to form a team. However, a more ideal number would be eight or ten to allow for substitutions.

Students with physical disabilities differ in levels of function, ability and mobility. Some may have issues with balance, range of motion, spasticity, strength, etc. A student in elementary or middle school with spina bifida, an amputation or spinal cord injury can have more functional ability than a high school student with cerebral palsy or muscular dystrophy. Because of the varying levels of function, adapted sports teams can be formed by combining students from different grade levels.

BEST PRACTICE

Include boys and girls from all grade levels with varying physical disabilities on the school district's adapted sports team(s)

4. COMPONENTS OF ADAPTED SPORTS

Student-athletes participating on adapted team sports, regardless of whether they are in general education or special education, must demonstrate an ability to: 1) take direction; 2) understand the rules and strategy of the game in which they are engaged; and, 3) adhere to and apply the rules of safety that protect the individual player, the team and their competitors. Not all students with disabilities will be able to compete in adapted sports.

4.1 Management

Adapted sports teams need school personnel to oversee and coordinate the program as well as Adapted Sports Coaches and Officials. Without this support, adapted sports programs cannot operate effectively.

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BEST PRACTICE

Manage adapted sports teams with the appropriate level of resources, including school personnel and a budget for equipment, uniforms, coaches' stipends, official's pay, fees, transportation, and training

School adapted sports programs function best when the school district creates a full time or part time position for an Area Coordinator (A/C). The A/C position is important because of the need to have a designated position within the school district's organizational structure that is responsible for fulfilling the duties for the program. A/C responsibilities include, but are not limited to, identifying coaches, sharing information about the program with all schools in the district, identifying eligible students, securing venues, arranging for transportation, distributing and collecting documents from parents, serving as the game day site administrator and are responsible for the local management of the programs under their care.

Note: In some cases, an Area Coordinator may serve multiple school district co-ops in rural areas. Establishing multi-district co-ops helps achieve a reasonable number of interested and available student athletes with qualifying disabilities for adapted team sports. Such likely co-ops are identified in the Needs Assessment, recommended prior to start-ups of statewide or local undertakings.

School adapted sports teams should have a student/coach ratio of 6 to 1 due to the varying functional abilities of these student athletes. When selecting coaches consider school personnel who may be working with this student population already such as: orthopedic classroom teachers, itinerate teachers, adapted physical education teachers, physical therapists, occupational therapists, recreational therapists, and any other school system employee (or partnering agency employee) who may have an interest and some experience in working with students with special needs.

4.2 Safety

To determine if a student can take part in adapted sports, they must submit an annual physical from a physician, approving participation. Include or add this requirement as an athletic policy. The form should include the type of disability the student has as well as any precautions associated with the disability.

School personnel, including adapted sports coordinators and coaches working with student athletes participating in adapted team sports, must be knowledgeable about the types of disabilities the students have, as well as any precautions associated with the disability. This information can be obtained by reviewing the annual physical, and by speaking with the child's teacher and parents. State Associations and schools may require their adapted sport coaches take specified training in the adapted sports they coach.

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From time to time, a student's involvement may be inappropriate if he/she lacks the ability to benefit from the program or if there are concerns about safety. When the adapted sports coach or coordinator has concerns of this type, they should be reviewed on a case-by-case basis with the parents' input and involvement.

4.3 Transportation

School systems may choose to provide transportation for their adapted sports teams based on the unique needs of the students participating in the program and whether or not a lift bus is needed to address access issues. Adapted sports team members may require transportation to the host venue for practices, plus home and away games. The number of buses and drivers can be determined based on the location of the student's home school and the location of the practice and game sites. Routes are best planned and coordinated within the district between the transportation department and Adapted Sports Area Coordinator.

4.4 Equipment

The equipment needed for adapted sports teams will be based on the sport offerings of the state and school districts. As an example, for wheelchair basketball, JV teams use a women's size basketball and Varsity teams use a men's size. It is helpful to purchase balls for the adapted sports team and store them at the host venue. Schools will also need to consider purchasing sports wheelchairs. This is because, student-athletes who participate on their school adapted sports teams practice and compete in a wheelchair even if they do not use one for daily mobility. This helps level the playing field and allows students who use assistive devices or have other impairments to safely take part in athletics. Those student's who use a wheelchair on a daily basis, including power-chair users, may utilize their own chair to compete. Typically, the average program may only need to acquire three wheelchairs for use by those students who are otherwise ambulatory.

4.5 Coaching

Coaching an adapted sports team is similar to coaching a traditional school team. "Our coaches come into the first practice with the same expectations as they would have for any able bodied team, such as mandatory attendance, being on time, and giving 100% on and off the court. The coaches emphasize to the athletes that they are representing their school and team, even when they are not on the court. That pride should cover their behavior in and out of school and their grades." (Christy Jones, Adapted Sports Coordinator for Houston County Public Schools)

Coaching duties are also similar for adapted sports teams as they are for traditional teams. Adapted sports coaches plan and organize practices while adhering to safety guidelines, proper procedures, and rules of play. They must maintain accurate records, uniforms, equipment, supplies, and communicate with parents.

The state or school district may require specified training for their adapted sports coaches. It is important for coaches to be knowledgeable about the various disabilities as well as any precautions or coaching implications associated with a particular disability.

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4.6 Funding

One of the most frequently heard reasons for not offering adapted sports is the extra cost involved. However, existing programs have found their costs to be quite reasonable. Carol McCullough said when she first presented the idea for the program to her associate superintendent; he was pleasantly surprised at the economics of the program. “He said, “Well that’s what it costs to run a high school football program,” she says. “So he equated one football program at one school with the number of kids we’re serving throughout our schools for a full year.” And despite what many administrators might expect, insurance is not an extra concern. It’s handled the same way as the able-bodied sports.⁸

Because students from Special Education and General Education take part in adapted sports, funding allocations can come from both the Special Education and Athletic Department’s budgets. Special Education may help fund the costs associated with transportation, wheelchairs, adapted equipment, and association fees. Athletics may help fund costs associated with coach’s stipends, official’s pay, uniforms, and supplies.

Forming a district-wide team, as opposed to a team for each school helps keep the costs reasonable, while offering opportunity for students with physical disabilities who would otherwise remain sidelined.

BEST PRACTICE

Apply similar components and the appropriate level of support for school teams taking part in adapted sports as other school teams receive

5. NEEDS ASSESSMENT

One of the more challenging aspects of providing adapted team sports for students with physical disabilities is in identifying their number and location. Students are not typically grouped together in any particular school, but more often attend schools throughout the district, making identification and grouping, more challenging.

The Needs Assessment (NA) is an important tool in implementing a successful plan because it assists state and local school administrators in making informed choices based on the actual number of students who may be eligible and determining where they are located. This information will help shape the scope of the undertaking, including the potential cost; resource allocation and the impact pilot program have in becoming an ongoing and sustainable part of a school district’s extracurricular athletic offering.

⁸ Berry, Lorraine. “Acting On IDEA.” *Athletic Management*. Feb/Mar. 2000: 41-46. Print.

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5.1 Data Gathering

From a state level, it is best to coordinate data gathering between the State Association and the State Department of Education. The State Special Education Department collects data annually, referred to as “Child Count” from local schools regarding the number of students who receive special education services. Students primarily represented in the State DOE report under Orthopedic Impairment (OI) and Traumatic Brain injury (TBI) categories are eligible. Students reported under Other Health Impaired (OHI) and who have a 504 plan may also be eligible depending on their specific disability.

At the local school level, coordinate data gathering between the Athletic and Special Education Departments to determine eligible students and their location within the district. In the local enrollment profile, include the total number of special education students by gender and ethnicity as well as the count for the primary exceptionality.

Accessing and compiling this data is a critical element of the needs assessment process, both at the state and local level, because it will drive the planning process.

5.2 Challenges and the Reliability of Data

The 26th Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004, Vol. 1 and 2, was one of the first Reports to confirm that there is a lack of consistency in Child Count reporting across the nation and even within States. This extends to how the various disability populations may be defined, how populations are grouped for reporting purposes, and the accuracy in determining all potential eligible students. Unfortunately, while IDEA requires school systems to annually count and report the number of students with disabilities in their district that receive Special Education services, there are other students who qualify for adapted sports who are not receiving special education services and therefore do not appear in the Child Count data.

Additionally, if the number of students who receive Special Education is less than ten at the local school district level, then that information is not shared due to privacy laws. This creates additional challenges in the data gathering process because a school district may have nine students eligible for an adapted sports team, but they will not show up in the initial state assessment.

5.3 Formula For Estimating Numbers

In adapted sports team composition, general education students may match or surpass the number of special education students. Across all grade levels, approximately 60% of eligible students who learn of the program will typically register for a team.

To obtain a more complete estimate of eligible students, multiple the eligible Special Education students times 2 to take into account those not reported and then multiple that number by 60%. Utilize the following formula:

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State DOE Child Count # x 2 x 60% = estimated # at the state level

Local School District's Enrollment Profile # x 2 x 60% = estimated # at the local

5.4 Interpreting the Data

Table I shows a sampling of data collected from a statewide needs assessment for Georgia school districts.⁹ The data was categorized under the disability type of OI and the formula described in section 5.3 was applied to obtain each school districts overall estimate of eligible students. The data from Table 1 shows seven school districts that have enough students to form adapted sports teams. Taking the example of wheelchair basketball, each of the seven districts can form at least one pilot district-wide adapted sports team comprised of 10-12 students. These teams can then compete against each other in regular season competition.

Table 1
School Districts With Estimated # Of Eligible Students

County	Disability Category	State DOE Child Count #	Est. Students with Disabilities Formula Applied	Potential Athletes
Bibb	OI	26	52	31
Clayton	OI	45	90	54
Cobb	OI	157	314	188
DeKalb	OI	45	90	54
Fulton	OI	58	116	70
Atlanta (city)	OI	25	50	30
Gwinnett	OI	97	194	116

⁹ Georgia Needs Assessment. (2005). In Contemplation of Expansion of Interscholastic adaptedSPORTS® for students with Physical Disabilities

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6. PILOT PROGRAMS

Simply put, a pilot is a trial run, a small-scale version of your larger project. A program pilot is an important step that can help you catch potential problems and prevent them from escalating as well as accomplish several goals before full implementation occurs. A pilot will help confirm if you are ready for full-scale implementation. A pilot test can serve as a trial run for your program and can help determine if any adjustments to your implementation plan are necessary. It can also reveal unforeseen challenges that might arise during implementation (i.e., issues with the setting and logistics, particular lessons or activities for which more staff training or attention may be necessary, etc.) and ensures that your staff is well prepared to handle issues that come up during the full-scale implementation.¹⁰

6.1 Planning

Once the needs assessment is complete at the state and local levels and the estimated number and location of eligible students is known, then a more detailed planning process can begin. As in planning any new sport or program, there are various stages involved with piloting adapted team sports as well.

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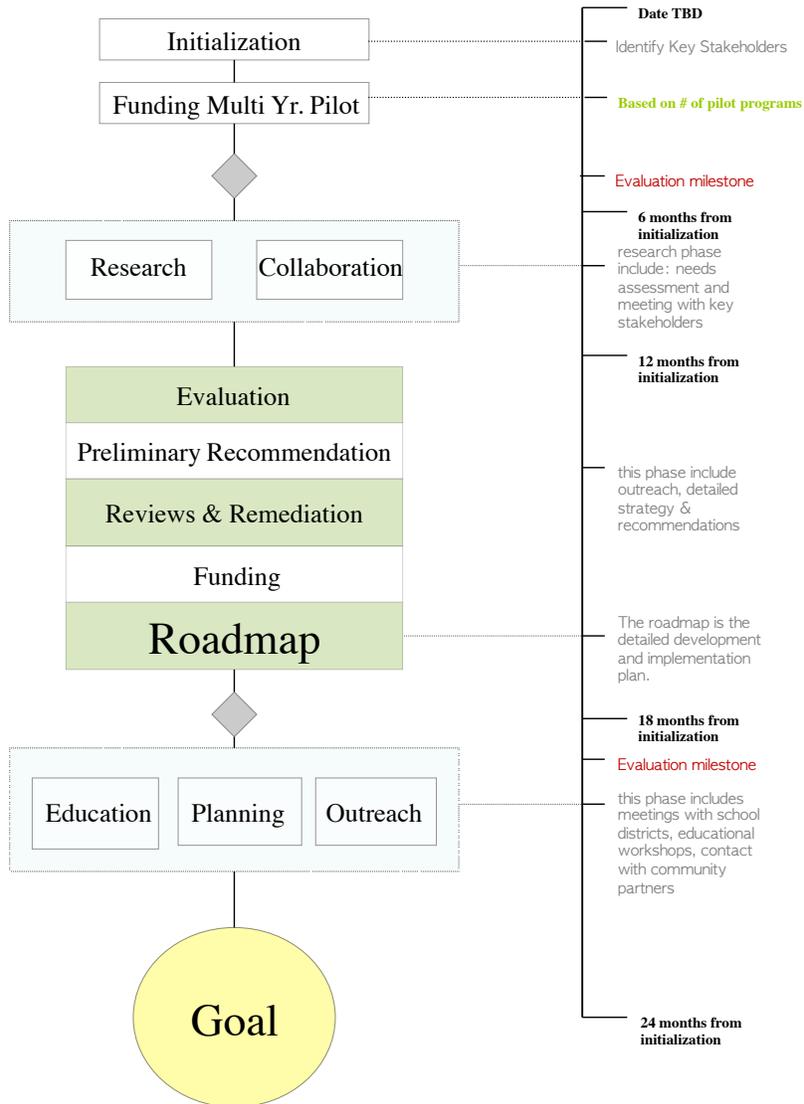
Piloting adapted sports teams in schools is the best place to start because it allows for a smaller scale implementation while working to solve any potential challenges toward a state-wide implementation

The following charts on pages 17 and 18 provide an overview that shows the process for adapted sports pilots. The goals and sample timeline involves four main phases that include: planning, funding, training and implementation.

¹⁰ Tips and Recommendations for Successfully Pilot Testing Your Program A Guide for the Office of Adolescent Health and Administration on Children, Youth and Families Grantees (n.d.) Retrieved from http://www.hhs.gov/ash/oah/oah-initiatives/teen_pregnancy/training/tip_sheets/pilot-testing-508.pdf

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Adapted Sports Pilot Process Overview



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Adapted Sports Pilot Process Overview

