



Special Olympics
Unified Sports[®]

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It is an incredible honor to be able to support Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools through the development of this playbook. As the Global Presenting Sponsor of Special Olympics Unified Sports, all of us at ESPN know the important role sports can play in uniting people of all abilities to play unified in sports and be unified in life.

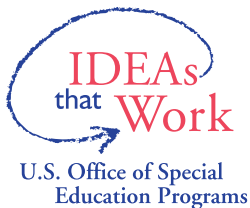
Being a good corporate citizen is a time-honored tradition at ESPN. Our relationship with Special Olympics spans more than 30 years and is a celebration of how the power of sports can inspire social inclusion and acceptance.

ESPN is proud to share inspiring stories with our fans and communities across the world, as we believe that sports creates a level playing field where people can work together towards a common goal. The lessons learned on the playing field about acceptance, inclusion and camaraderie are translated to all elements of life, and help to develop the leaders of a more unified world. Every day we see great stories that exemplify this from schools across the country. We know educators and students who use this resource will find a wide array of activities to help their schools become communities of welcome where everyone is recognized for their value and skills.

Good luck as you play unified!

Kevin Negandhi, ESPN SportsCenter Anchor

Sage Steele, ESPN SportsCenter on the Road Host & NBA Countdown Host



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Why do we need schools to be socially inclusive?

Creating an educational atmosphere that prepares every student for college, career and civic life is a complex proposition. Accomplishing this requires intentional planning and implementation, strong collaborations and initiatives that provide equitable and quality opportunities for all.

Successfully meeting the needs of all students hinges largely on the climate of the school, which affects every aspect of students' school experiences - from their social and emotional well-being to the overall quality of the educational experience. A positive school climate creates the necessary conditions where diversity is valued, equity is demanded, and every student is a contributing member.

A key aspect of an effective school climate is the way in which children with intellectual disabilities are provided opportunities to learn alongside their peers without disabilities and to engage in the normative life experiences of school. The sense of belonging or connectedness within the school is particularly important for students with intellectual disabilities and is associated with several important educational outcomes, including regular school attendance.¹

Yet, even those students with intellectual disabilities who attend schools with policies and procedures that provide an inclusive *educational* experience are too often disengaged from many school-based, social opportunities. It is perhaps not surprising that students with disabilities participate less in school-sponsored teams, clubs and organizations than their peers without disabilities² and, overall, are more likely to experience social isolation within the school setting. This isolation manifests itself in detrimental effects that reverberate across the school setting. Consider the following:

- Bullying and other mean-spirited actions can have violent and tragic outcomes. 71% of young people say they have seen bullying in their schools.³ **Students with disabilities are at greater risk for being victimized than their peers without disabilities.**^{4,5}
- Students with intellectual disabilities do not routinely experience a school environment that addresses their academic needs and also their social needs to make friends. **While 61% of all students with disabilities spend more than 80% of their school day among their general education peers, for students with intellectual disabilities that rate falls to 17%.⁶**





A Vision of Social Inclusion



Imagine a school where no student is excluded because of the degree or type of disability, or the services required to meet her needs. All students are engaged in positive ways, and a variety of experiences are offered that build on individual strengths and respect diversity.

As you walk through the hallways, you see posters, flyers and artwork representing all kinds of clubs, teams and students. The clubs are inclusive, and there are teams and extracurricular opportunities for all.

You see students from the football team high-fiving students from special education classrooms. It is a place of respect where differences are accepted and appreciated. It is a school where the voices of all students are heard, and all students have the chance to be leaders.

Every student is given an opportunity to meaningfully contribute and participate, and they are noticed for their similarities and strengths rather than disabilities. All around you is a plethora of evidence that students feel a sense of belonging, and feel that they are a valued part of the school.

What is the Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools program?

Since its founding Special Olympics has been providing quality sports opportunities for individuals with intellectual disabilities across the globe. Today, **Special Olympics serves as a driving force for social inclusion**, with the vision to create a world where “people with intellectual disabilities of all abilities are welcomed in their communities and join with others to learn, work, compete and play with the same rights and opportunities as others.”

Integral to this work is a focus on youth. Special Olympics views youth as “powerful and effective advocates... open-minded to new things,” and as having “the courage of conviction to step up and defend their beliefs. For this reason, [Special Olympics] find(s) that young people are some of the most powerful and effective advocates on behalf of acceptance”.

Since 2008 Special Olympics has been actively engaged in the development and implementation of a school-based strategy supported and endorsed by the U.S. Department of Education for promoting and increasing the social inclusion of youth with intellectual disabilities in schools and in their communities across the country.

The Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools program is aimed at promoting social inclusion through intentionally planned and implemented activities affecting systems-wide change. With sports as the foundation, the three component model offers a unique combination of effective activities that equip young people with tools and training to create sports, classroom and school climates of acceptance. These are school climates where students with disabilities feel welcome and are routinely included in, and feel a part of, all activities, opportunities and functions.

Youth and adults working together collaboratively in an inclusive setting create socially inclusive schools.

Unified Champion Schools promote a school climate that:

- is free from bullying and exclusion,
- combats stereotypes and negative attitudes,
- eliminates hurtful language,
- promotes healthy activity and interactions, and
- is welcoming and values the engagement of all students.

It is not intended for students to simply be recipients of programming, but rather be architects of lasting change and community building, where adults serve as allies to youth, rather than managers of youth. In fact, a central tenet of the Unified Champion Schools program is **inclusive, intergenerational leadership**, where shared goals and work are owned collectively by both youth and adults.

Within Unified Champion Schools:

- Students with and without intellectual disabilities are provided opportunities for physical activity and for building positive peer relationships across the school setting - in hallways and lunchrooms, in classrooms and gymnasiums, and on athletic fields of play.
- Students with and without intellectual disabilities are provided opportunities to interact with their peers and to personally learn and grow.

At its core, the Unified Schools strategy is not just about including students with disabilities, but unifying all students; moving from adult-led programming to student-led mobilization and action; and transitioning from sports as recreation to sports as a catalyst for social inclusion and change.



Helpful Resources

More information on how schools can promote social inclusion can be found in **A Framework for Socially Inclusive Schools**, found at www.specialolympics.org/hsplaybook-resources



Special Olympics
**Unified Champion
Schools**



How does the Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools program support current education initiatives?

The activities of the Unified Champion Schools program enhance a number of key educational initiatives in important and relevant ways. The initiatives found below are frequently a part of school improvement plans and activities as school staff seek to increase student success. If you are already focusing on any of these initiatives, becoming a Unified Champion School will amplify and enhance your existing emphasis.

Core Content and 21st Century Skills

The resources and activities provided through the Unified Champion Schools program allow **students to gain core content and 21st century skills across the curriculum.** Deep understandings and ability to use acquired skills happen when students are provided experiences which draw on prior knowledge and utilize higher order thinking skills as they apply their learning to strengthen the environment around them. Critical thinking and problem solving, communication and collaboration, social and cross-cultural skills and leadership and responsibility are all 21st Century Skills that are reflected and reinforced through implementation of the Unified Champion Schools program.

A Positive, Caring, Equitable School Climate

Context matters. There is growing research that demonstrates students perform better academically, socially and emotionally when they are meaningfully engaged, contributing members of a school with a **positive, caring, equitable school climate.** A school that expects, encourages and supports inclusive practices is a critical underpinning to the establishment of an equitable learning environment for all students. This has been shown to result in positive impacts on student performance, and is supported by the Unified Champion Schools program.

Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports

Currently implemented in thousands of schools, **Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS)** are being used to better teach and reinforce expected behaviors throughout the school. The Unified Champion Schools program supports this work across all school settings by providing meaningful opportunities for students to work and learn together in ways that support all learners and create an equitable, caring environment for all. Culturally responsive educational strategies, differentiated instruction and positive behavioral supports are just a few of the bedrock practices employed in inclusive schools. Inclusive education should be a universal commitment and a core value to ensure equitable access and success for students and adults at all three tiers of a PBIS school-wide system.

School Connectedness

School connectedness is an important factor in student success and well-being. Students who feel they belong and are valued contributors to the community are more likely to attend school, have higher grades and test scores, and are less likely to engage in risky behaviors and harmful activities such as bullying.⁷ Practices that **promote school connectedness** are incorporated in the Unified Champion Schools program by providing opportunities for all students to engage in meaningful school-based activities.

Physical Health and Emotional Well-being

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services suggests that regular physical activity has a number of benefits to **overall physical health as well as the emotional well-being of adolescents** such as the reduction of anxiety and stress and improvements in self-esteem.⁸ Unified Sports extends the opportunities for all students to be actively engaged in a variety of sports and physical activities which provide both physical and socio-emotional benefits.



Helpful Resources

Seven characteristics of socially inclusive schools have been identified. A guide outlining federal, state, and district level policy considerations that support these characteristics can be found in “**A Policy Guide for Socially Inclusive Schools**” at www.specialolympics.org/hsplaybook-resources

Why are Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools needed?

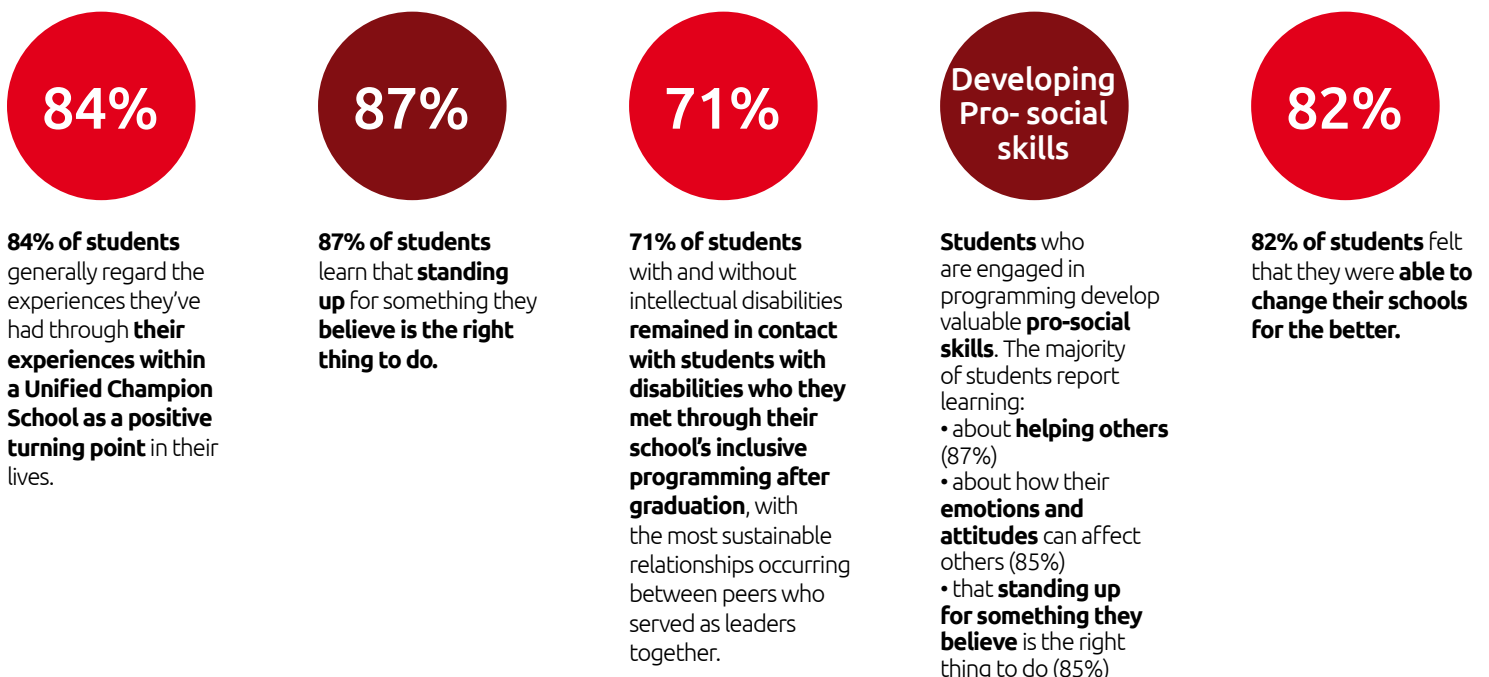


The Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools program promotes a socially inclusive school climate where acceptance, respect and human dignity for all students is the norm. As the data below demonstrate, a Unified Champion School equitably supports students with and without intellectual disabilities and fosters meaningful opportunities for every student to contribute.

Within Unified Champion Schools, students without disabilities hold more positive attitudes toward their peers with intellectual disabilities, are more tolerant, and realize the impact their words and actions have on others.^{9,10,11}

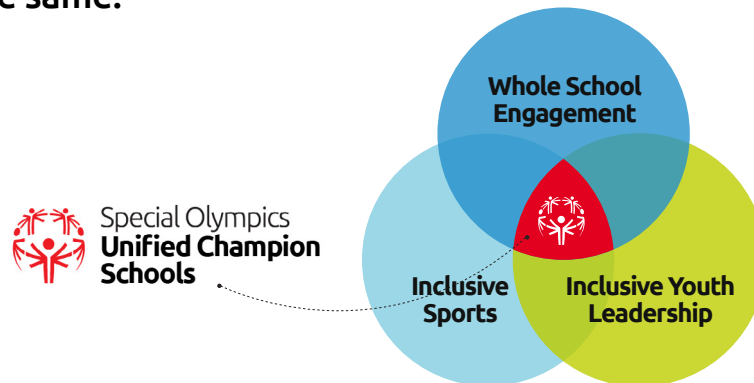
Socially inclusive school and classroom climates are more evident where students with disabilities feel welcome, are routinely included in and feel they are a valued part of all activities, opportunities and functions.¹²

Extensive evaluation of the Unified Champion Schools program has revealed the following positive impacts:^{6,7,8}



How does the Special Olympics Unified Champion School program work?

The program is designed to be woven into the fabric of the school, enhancing current efforts and providing rich opportunities that lead to meaningful change in creating a socially inclusive school that supports and engages all learners. What a Unified Champion School “looks like” can vary greatly from school to school, based on the needs, goals, schedules and other factors unique to each school; but the basic building blocks remain the same.



A Unified Champion School implements **three specific components**, all of which are intertwined with the others in a cohesive effort to increase social inclusion throughout the school. Those components are:

- **Whole School Awareness and Involvement:** awareness and education activities that promote inclusion and reach the majority of the school population and all students in the school have opportunities to participate through sustained school-wide activities.
- **Inclusive Youth Leadership:** students with and without intellectual disabilities working together to lead and plan advocacy, awareness, and other Special Olympics and related inclusive activities throughout the school year.
- **Inclusive Sports:** a fully inclusive sports or fitness program that combines an approximately equal number of students with and without intellectual disabilities, such as Special Olympics Unified Sports, Interscholastic Unified Sports, Unified PE or Unified Intramurals.



Inclusion Tip

In working toward becoming a socially inclusive school, it is important for the entire school community to remember that all students are peers first. The subgroups to which they belong are secondary to their status as peers, deserving of an equitably welcoming, nurturing and accepting school environment.

The experiences provided for one-on-one interactions to take place when youth participate in inclusive sports activities or work alongside one another to effect change, and raising awareness through school-wide activities where peer group influence is leveraged, are at the crux of the Unified Champion Schools program.

By offering a combination of inclusive sports and youth leadership options, as well as a variety of activities that engage students throughout the school, the school community as a whole has a part in building a socially inclusive school climate – one free from teasing, bullying and the exclusion of any group of peers. It is the synthesis of the cumulative experiences of students and adults throughout the entire school that results in schools realizing their full potential as socially inclusive communities.

We know that effective change does not happen unless it is done with intentionality, adheres to a shared vision for the process and outcomes, and is guided by a team of leaders who strategically move the school community forward in changing the policies and practices necessary to support the work. Therefore, rather than a strictly prescriptive approach, we envision the direction and implementation of the program to be determined by the school.

An inclusive Unified Champion School Leadership Team should be in place to ensure efforts are thoughtfully planned, guided by shared goals, collaboratively led, and intentionally implemented to support the current initiatives and priorities of the school. This team facilitates social inclusion work in the school within an inclusive, intergenerational leadership framework where adults and youth with and without intellectual disabilities co-create school-wide change.

Because youth and adults see and experience the school from different perspectives and with different

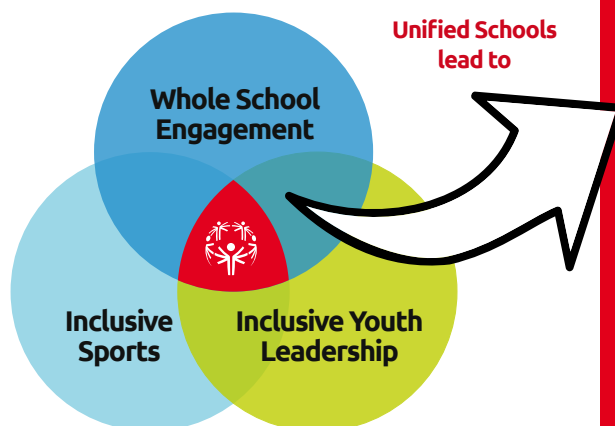
interpretations, have different relationships and networks within the school community, and different power and tools to activate those networks, both must be engaged to drive systemic change.

Words of wisdom often shared by youth leaders engaged in Special Olympics is, ***“Nothing about us without us.”***

Creating a socially inclusive school is a process of building a school culture that encourages, supports and expects social inclusion at the heart of how the school functions. As the graphic below illustrates, each opportunity should incorporate a combination of the components, provide unique and engaging opportunities for students to participate, and enhance current social inclusion efforts. Not every activity will incorporate all three components, and not every activity will be engaging for all students.

However, all three components will be evident within the school, and the goal will be for each activity to integrate at least two of the components. Throughout the process of implementing the activities, it is important to offer multiple opportunities for all students to be engaged in a variety of ways.

The graphic below provides an example of how the three components can be woven together in becoming a Unified Champion School.



Students with and without intellectual disabilities organize a Unified Walking Club. They make arrangements for accommodations to ensure all students have an equitable opportunity to participate. The club meets weekly and asks members to get friends and family to make a pledge for the miles they walk. The money will be used to support building an accessible playground at the elementary school. All students in the school are encouraged to help by pledging donations, organizing and collecting pledges, or participating in the club by walking each week.

To enhance inclusive efforts at the elementary school, the high school students engage the younger students in participating as walkers for special events.

They also design and teach inclusive activities during physical education classes at the elementary school, incorporating games which can be played on the accessible playground equipment.



An Introduction to Whole School Engagement



Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools provide opportunities for all students to learn and practice social inclusion through sustained engagement whether in the classroom, during an assembly, as part of a sports experience, or through engagement in planned activities that reach the whole school. Through whole school engagement opportunities embedded within and between the Inclusive Youth Leadership and Unified Sports components, the school becomes a powerful community that represents new ways of thinking and acting.

Many possibilities exist for promoting social inclusion throughout the school such as assemblies and activity days, classrooms that nurture positive peer relationships between students of all abilities, and the expectation that respect and acceptance are the norm for the entire school environment. The result is a school where all students feel they play a meaningful part in school clubs, sports and even informal interactions that occur in the cafeteria or hallways.

Whole School Engagement is a unique and important component because it:

- Engages the entire staff and student body in building awareness and understanding of the benefits to all when the assets and contributions of each individual are recognized, honored and supported.
- Creates a socially inclusive school climate and expands ownership of the efforts beyond a passionate few, creating a ripple effect of actions and advocacy.
- Enhances the school climate by nurturing development, learning and achievement through engaging environments where students, teachers, administrators, parents and community members feel connected, safe and successful.
- Creates communities of acceptance where students with disabilities feel welcome and valued as meaningful participants in school activities, classroom learning and leadership opportunities.
- Models to the larger community that inclusivity can and does have positive outcomes for all members of the school or community.

There is a space for every individual in the school community to contribute to achieving the school's goals. In Unified Champion Schools such contributions are realized when students and staff are involved as participants in a whole school activity, and when students with and without intellectual disabilities serve as teammates on a Unified team, are leaders or members of an inclusive school club, or actively serve on the school's intergenerational leadership team.



An Introduction to Youth Leadership

Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools offer opportunities for young people of all abilities to be leaders in designing and implementing classroom and extracurricular activities that promote equality and acceptance and, ultimately, create socially inclusive school climates. The Inclusive Youth Leadership component intentionally blends opportunities for students with and without intellectual disabilities across the Whole School Engagement and Unified Sports components to advance social inclusion in the school.

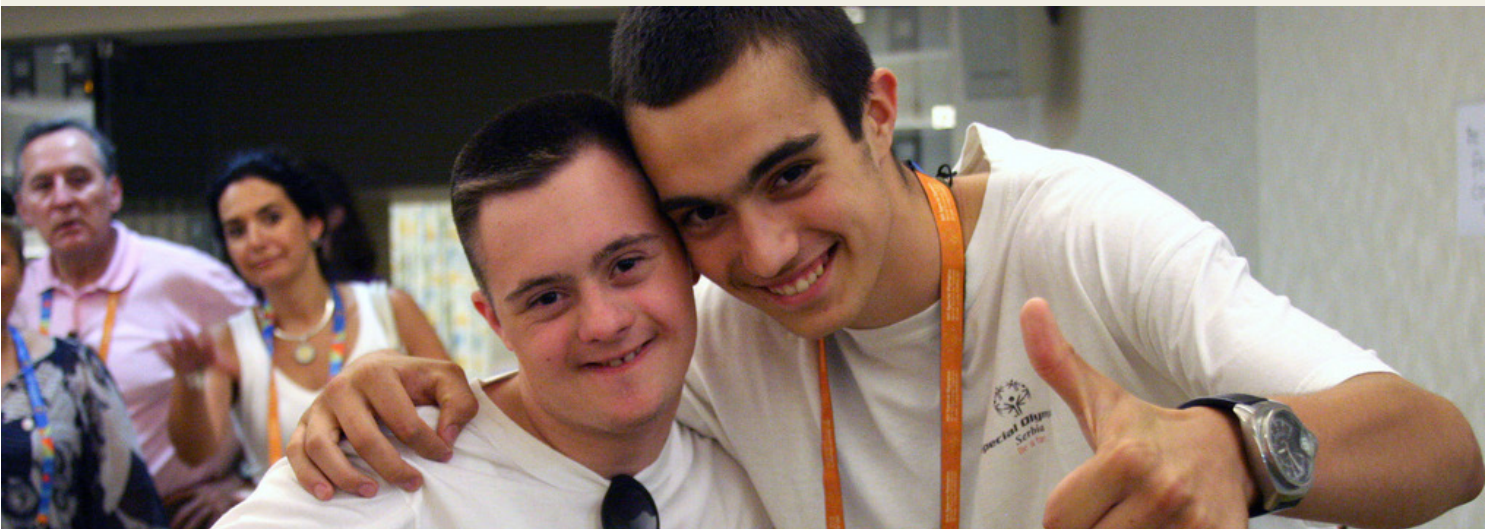
More than something that provides direct personal value to the young people, inclusive youth leadership has a larger purpose in shifting cultural norms and even shifting formal policies and practices within a school. The benefits and focus of youth leadership are no different than those of developing leadership in adults. We invest in teachers not merely because it is good for them individually, but because it impacts students and our schools more broadly. The same is true for why we engage students in inclusive youth leadership.

Inclusive Youth Leadership is a unique and important component because it:

- Recognizes the leadership assets and values that all students possess and can use to contribute meaningfully to the school community.

- Provides students with and without intellectual disabilities the knowledge, skills and dispositions to take on leadership roles in their school, creating an environment in which socially inclusive opportunities can thrive.
- Offers opportunities for all students to become leaders, developing an understanding that students of varying abilities and backgrounds can lead.
- Encourages intergenerational leadership opportunities that promote a deeper understanding of the strengths, gifts and skills of all students as co-leaders with adults.
- Guides administrators and teachers in incorporating the vision and insight of youth as they step into leadership positions and create inclusive environments in their schools.
- Offers teachers a greater understanding and appreciation for the viability and value of increased social inclusion in their classrooms leading to greater opportunities for students with different abilities to collaborate on classroom and academic projects.

When students from Unified Champion Schools take the lead as catalysts for change by re-envisioning and then restructuring their student council into an inclusive organization, initiating a Unified Sports opportunity, or working with teachers to nurture positive inclusive peer relationships in the classroom, the school's efforts to improve school climate and make meaningful curriculum connections will be enhanced. Inclusive youth leadership is also promoted through intergenerational leadership opportunities for students to lead a school initiative collaboratively with adults, such as collecting data and taking action to improve the school climate.





An Introduction to Inclusive Sports



Special Olympics Unified Sports® is a unique program that provides students with and without intellectual disabilities with opportunities to meaningfully participate in sports activities alongside one another in a variety of settings. Through the various models offered, schools are able to provide important inclusive sports experiences that work in tandem with

Whole School Engagement and Inclusive Youth Leadership efforts.

Through Unified Sports, students come together in a setting where all teammates are challenged to improve their skills and gain a better understanding of each other's abilities through a spirit of equality and team unity. Unified Sports leads to new friendships, improved self-esteem, positive changes in attitudes and behaviors, improved sports skills and a deeper connection to the school.^{13,14,15}

Students with and without intellectual disabilities have opportunities to participate in Unified Sports activities through three basic models:

Competitive

Brings together students with and without intellectual disabilities of similar athletic abilities to train and compete on the same team. School-based teams in this model often compete within an interscholastic athletics league, an intramural setting, or through community-based Special Olympics tournaments

Player Development

Similar to traditional Unified Sports, but teammates of higher abilities serve as mentors to assist teammates of lower abilities in developing sport-specific skills and tactics and in successfully participating in less structured, cooperative team environments.

Recreation

Extends the concept of Unified Sports to the non-competitive realm, offering inclusive recreational sports opportunities for students with and without intellectual disabilities. Examples of Unified Recreation in schools include activities such as Unified PE, Unified Field Day or a Unified Walking Club.

For many students, Unified Sports provides the opportunity to experience the joy of participation in a school activity, whether they represent their school as part of an interscholastic Unified Sports team, play on an intramural team, or simply have an opportunity to be involved in other inclusive activities. Inclusive youth leadership and whole school engagement are supported in Unified Sports through varied opportunities such as youth engaging their peers with and without intellectual disabilities in initiating a Unified Sports day or activity for the whole school, or working with the physical education teacher to create inclusive sport and recreation opportunities within the school day.

Unified Sports is a unique and important component because it:

- Provides valuable social inclusion opportunities for all teammates to build friendships, on and off the playing field.
- Integrates athletes with and without intellectual disabilities in a setting where all teammates are challenged to improve their skills and become physically fit.
- Prepares students for participation in other school activities or community sports programs.
- Strengthens self-esteem and builds confidence as students take on leadership roles in the school and participate in inclusive activities.
- Models genuine inclusion for the entire school community.
- Increases community awareness of the spirit and skills of individuals with intellectual disabilities.



Picture of a Special Olympics Unified Champion School

There it stands, SUCCESS FOR ALL HIGH SCHOOL!

As you enter the campus you can tell there is something special about this school. The sign outside welcomes everyone and highlights the successes of all students (e.g.,

“Congratulations to the Unified Basketball Team for Winning the Regional Unified Basketball Tournament!”).

As you walk through the front door of the school, the positive atmosphere speaks volumes. Students and adults are greeting each other and chatting, welcoming visitors to the school with a smile. The walls and bulletin boards are filled with diverse student work and posters highlighting inclusive clubs and activities, and a banner stating, “Special Olympics Unified Champion School,” has an honored place in the entry hall. The trophy case includes pictures, trophies, ribbons, newspaper articles and school letters celebrating a wide variety of sports opportunities, including Unified Sports and student participation in inclusive state competitions, Special Olympics competitions, intramurals and interscholastic sports achievements.



All visitors are escorted around the school by an inclusive pair—one student with and one without an intellectual disability. It is obvious that these students are proud of their school and the way that everyone is engaged. They walk you through the hallways and explain how the Unified Club functions. With great pride, they explain that this has become the most popular club in the school; so popular, in fact, that they had to create a second club so that everyone had the opportunity to be actively engaged.

They shared that this year, the Unified Club worked with the school’s cheerleaders to ensure there are pep rallies for every sport, including Unified Sports, and a cheering section

at all school competitions. The Unified Club and cheerleaders also created a “Wall of Fame” to recognize Special Olympics athletes participating in regional or state competitions.

The members of the Unified Club focused on making the lunchroom a welcoming place by ensuring the walls are filled with a diverse collection of art and announcements of inclusive activities. They also organized activities to get students interacting (including a very competitive bocce tournament), have students volunteer to welcome students and visitors as they enter the cafeteria, and to be in charge of seating options to make sure that everyone has a place to sit and someone with whom to talk.

Student opportunities for inclusive engagement are not limited to the Unified Club, however. Last year the members of the Student Council approached the principal and their teacher-sponsor and petitioned for a revision of the selection process and membership guidelines to ensure that the Student Council accurately reflects the entire student body. In addition, the Student Council created a service project to support middle level students with a smooth transition into high school. As the Student Council finds success and acceptance, the members have become more verbal in identifying ways to ensure that their school and community are inclusive.

As you continue your tour through the school, you peek into a language arts classroom and see a small, inclusive group of students collaborating on an op-ed for the local newspaper, addressing how the gifts and abilities of all individuals enrich the work of the whole. Another group is working on a persuasive letter to the school board to make social inclusion a priority for all of the district’s schools. A third group is working on an article for the school newspaper on the upcoming Unified Prom.



As you walk by the gymnasium, you notice inclusive physical education classes where students are participating together. Your tour guides enthusiastically tell you about Unified Sports and explain that they both play on a team. In addition to the ongoing bocce tournaments that take place during lunch, there are both Unified Basketball and Track

and Field teams. Because of the success and popularity of Unified Sports, the students and coaches plan to offer additional sports next year. Your school guides explain how the members of the Unified Club were instrumental in getting Unified Sports started at the school and how they continually work to engage more students on the teams.

The PTA Booster Club has expanded to support the Unified Sports teams, too. In fact, as the school began to offer more students the opportunity to play sports for the school through Unified Sports, more parents have become involved and joined the Booster Club.

Before you leave the school, the principal invites you to attend the Intergenerational Leadership Team meeting. As you sit in the meeting and listen to discussions about future assemblies, how to ensure that new students are paired up with other students who serve as their peer buddies, and specifics about this year's R-word campaign, it becomes obvious that everyone is committed to making Success for All High School a truly inclusive school. It is also clear that the students are equal members of the Leadership Team, leading discussions and making suggestions.



While the Team is pleased with the direction their school is taking, they continue to identify ways to improve the school climate. Last year the Leadership Team completed the "Characteristics of Socially Inclusive Schools Assessment" and "Social Inclusion Scale" to gain a better understanding of the climate of the schools in terms of its level of inclusion. They then used this information to engage others to find ways to make the school more socially inclusive. Since they were so pleased with the guidance that the first two assessments provided, the Leadership Team decided to use the Social Inclusion Rubric in their process of addressing continuous improvement because it provides clear pictures of what the school looks like as they move along the continuum.

As you exit the school, you leave with a smile on your face and many stories to share with others. It is clear that this is a school that fully embraces social inclusion and is creating a school environment where all students are engaged and successful. It is truly a Unified Champion School!

Definition of a Special Olympics Unified Champion School

A Special Olympics Unified Champion School has an inclusive school climate and exudes a sense of collaboration, engagement and respect for all members of the student body and staff. A Unified Champion School is one that has demonstrated commitment to inclusion by adopting the three components as described below. These include Special Olympics Unified Sports®, Inclusive Youth Leadership and Whole-School Engagement.

While the components are listed individually, they should be implemented in coordination with each other and supported by a leadership team composed of representatives from all areas of the school, including students, teachers, administrators and parents. Research has proven that when all three components are incorporated, there is a deeper impact on the individual participants as well as the overall culture and climate of the school.

Strategies and plans for sustainability are a key to successfully ensuring that the three Unified Champion School components will continue into the future and truly become part of the school culture. Examples include such things as student fundraising, Unified Booster Clubs or Unified Sports/Club expenses included in school budgets.

Unified Champion School Components



Inclusive Sports

A fully-inclusive sports or fitness program that combines an approximately equal number of students with and without intellectual disabilities. Examples include such things as Interscholastic Unified Sports, Unified PE or Unified Intramurals. These activities occur throughout the school year with the support of an adult coach and include opportunities for competition.

Whole-School Engagement

Awareness and education activities that promote inclusion and reach the majority of the school population. Examples include such things as Spread the Word to End the Word (R-Word) Campaigns, Pep Rallies or “Fans in the Stands” for Unified Sports teams, Respect Campaigns or student fundraising. Ideally students with and without disabilities are involved with planning and leading awareness events with the support of an adult in the school.

Inclusive Youth Leadership

Students with and without intellectual disabilities work to lead awareness, Unified Sports, advocacy, inclusion and other Special Olympics activities throughout the school year. Examples include such things as Unified Clubs, inclusive student councils or similar types of inclusive student groups. The clubs are supported by an adult liaison and offer leadership opportunities and/or training for students with and without disabilities





Examples of Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools

Read some Unified Champion Schools success stories!

You have read about the components that make up a Unified Champion School. One important characteristic of the program is that the components, and activities that make up each component, can be configured in a variety of ways to reflect the characteristics of the school and specific needs and ideas of the students. In other areas of the Playbook, possible activities or structures have been identified to assist with the initial implementation of supporting strategies.

However, the implementation of the Unified Champion Schools program can vary from school to school, and will likely expand and change over time as a school strives to meet its strategic goals of social inclusion. The longer the students and adults work to create a tolerant, supportive and respectful school climate, the more ideas they will identify to make their school more inclusive. So, a hundred or a thousand schools can be designated Unified Champion Schools, but each can look slightly different as staff and students work to meet the specific needs of the school and students.

The following brief descriptions reflect how the students and adults at high schools across the country have implemented the Unified Champion Schools program in powerful and effective ways. Each looks a little different, but each is a committed, socially inclusive school.

Cactus Shadows High School

Cave Creek, Arizona



The principal, Steve Bebee, is an outstanding example of how a high school leader creates a school-wide social inclusion leadership team and effectively engages the team to successfully integrate the Unified Champion School program into core school structures, programs and activities. Cactus Shadows High School takes inclusiveness seriously. Shared leadership among adults and students is nurtured to ensure the school is socially inclusive and bullying is reduced. Special education students have campus jobs, and administration and staff have daily contact with them.

While the school has experienced progress in inclusion, the goal is to enhance the opportunities for more students to understand, participate and contribute to inclusiveness. Special and general education teachers work together to provide quality opportunities for students to engage in inclusive activities.

Students have multiple opportunities to engage in creating a socially inclusive school climate through the Student Council, elective courses and the various Unified activities offered, all of which are popular with the students. The Adapted PE teacher engages incoming students without disabilities each year, and gives them opportunities to play on the Unified Sports teams and collaborate with students with disabilities.

The school also added a Health and Fitness program (Healthy LEAP) as a unit in their Adapted PE class which involves more students by engaging them in a fun fitness program, using sports and an interactive health program to educate them on proper nutrition and other healthy habits specific to Arizona; such as, sun safety, hydration and personal hygiene. Cactus Shadows also incorporated the Unified PE activities

into the Adapted PE course where each student with an intellectual disability is matched with a student without an intellectual disability, and they work together seamlessly. The Falcon Unified Club was started to provide avenues of engagement for students who are not interested in sports but who would like the social interaction and acceptance of a club that gives students opportunities to become involved in the community and hang out together outside of school.

In addition to the numerous school-wide activities implemented, such as the R-word campaign and disability awareness week, a student leader started a school spirit campaign called “Falcon Awesome” that encourages students to come together to compare and discuss how to unite the student body and embrace individuality and diversity. A banner hangs in the main gym with the new Falcon Oath reminding students of what it means to be a Falcon with respect, and 90% of students voluntarily pledged.

Overall, the administration, teachers and students at Cactus Shadows are committed to continuously improving their inclusive efforts at the school.

“Cactus Shadows High School takes inclusiveness seriously. Shared leadership among adults and students is nurtured to ensure the school is socially inclusive and bullying is reduced.”

Batesville High School

Batesville, Arkansas

This was one of the first schools to implement the Unified Champion Schools program in Arkansas, and they have demonstrated how a comprehensive program can take hold within a short period of time. They began the program with a calendar full of whole school engagement and awareness activities. Besides the official “Spread the Word to End the Word” campaign, the students and school leaders have implemented their own awareness campaigns throughout the year. The students also work to ensure that the physical environment in the school “speaks” social inclusion. Classes have made Unified banners that decorate the walls of the school and are used to increase spirit and support at pep rallies.



The Unified Club currently has 45 members, and they are always looking for new ways to make their school more socially inclusive. For example, the members of the club attended Camp Shriver in the summer where they came away with several ideas that have been incorporated into their school year activities.

Batesville High School students create their own social inclusion activities as well as participate in school-wide events. In the past, these have ranged from having a float in the Homecoming Parade to holding a school-wide pep rally to celebrate the successes of their USA Games athletes and students participating in state Unified Sports competitions. They participate in Unified Floor Hockey, Basketball and Softball along with several local sports competitions.

Realizing the importance of including everyone, they have chosen an interesting way to recruit members for the Unified Sports teams. They are appealing to the athlete within everyone; not every student can make a varsity sports

team, but the Unified Sports team is open to all students.

They have engaged several players not previously aware of Special Olympics but became interested in Unified Sports because they wanted to play sports for their school. “Playing Unified” has opened more opportunities at this school for students both with and without intellectual disabilities.

The students also have implemented fundraising efforts such as the Polar Plunge to support the social inclusion work at their school, and members of Partners Club have volunteered at traditional Special Olympics Arkansas events in their area.

It is clear that students at Batesville High School are leaders in social inclusion.



Everett High School

Lansing, Michigan



Everett High School is part of a district-wide commitment to social inclusion and it benefits from high levels of administrative support and great expectations for all students. Everett High School is one of 18 schools in the district to implement the Unified Champion Schools program.

One of the strategies for increasing social inclusion at Everett High School is the Youth Activation Council, which is listed on the school website as an official school club. The members of the YAC include students with and without disabilities as well as English Language Learners.

Everett High School has a School Improvement Plan that identifies improving the school climate as one of the stated objectives. Students perceived a need for a better school climate, citing teasing, bullying and fighting in the halls as problems. However, they thought the work they were doing and R-word awareness was making a difference in the school climate, breaking down stereotypes and misconceptions.

YAC members view their role in the school as being “Upstanders,” not “Bystanders.” An “upstander” is someone who recognizes when something is wrong and acts to make it right. When “upstanders” see or hear about someone being bullied, they speak up. A “bystander” sees something wrong and does nothing about it—just stands by. They described experiences in which they spoke up to friends and family members about the “uncool” use of the R-word. Students expressed that the Unified Champion Schools program provides a sense of belonging and gives them a voice. They spend their YAC meetings planning many inclusive activities, including field trips, Unified Sports

events, Spread the Word campaigns, and dances or parties to engage students throughout the school. A clear sense of camaraderie has developed between students in special and general education through this work.

The students at the school have been described as “talking the talk and walking the walk.” In fact, two students played significant roles in helping Michigan legislators understand issues around the use of the “R-word.” They spoke about their experiences with Unified Cheerleading and testified before the Health and Wellness Committees of both the House and Senate in support of the “R-word” package of bills to remove the word, “retard(ed),” from state communications and laws. The girls were a major reason the bills were passed into law, and they were there to witness the Lt. Governor sign the bill into law at the R-word Rally.



The students do so much together. They participate in Unified cheerleading, track, bowling, bocce and basketball. Students attend the Youth Rally, participate in the Polar Plunge to get funding for the programs at school, and attend football games together. Further, they move outside of the school walls to perform community service.

In the spirit of true collaboration, they have experienced great success. Everett’s Unified softball team attended the Special Olympics North America Softball Invitational in 2013 and brought home gold! A pair of Unified bowlers who attended the 2014 Special Olympics USA Games also brought home gold medals. Everett’s Unified cheer team traveled to Los Angeles to participate in the 2015 Special Olympics World Games.

Through all that they do, the students and staff at Everett High School show the world the power and importance of social inclusion and support for all.

Montgomery High School

Skillman, New Jersey

Several factors make this a strong Unified Champion School. There is outstanding youth leadership. The school's Youth Activation Committee (YAC) was founded by two longtime Unified sports partners and Special Olympics New Jersey (SONJ) volunteers. Both were extremely dedicated and passionate about starting the club and ensuring that it would be successful and sustainable.

Their first action was to put a plan together for the Play Unified Club by attending SONJ's Youth Summit, bringing in SONJ staff for assistance and calling a meeting with the school administration and faculty members (i.e., special education, guidance, and athletics). Because of the student's success in engaging adult allies, the club has been successful in integrating all three components of the Unified Champion Schools program throughout the building and into the school culture. In addition, they recruited freshman and sophomore students to ensure that there would be a group ready to take over when the current students graduated.

The program grew out of a SONJ flagship Unified Sports program so that was their strongest component in the first year. Through a series of awareness campaigns—a disability awareness fair, a pep rally, participation of the Montgomery Unified Soccer team at the 2014 USA Games, nearly everyone in the building knows about the Play Unified Club.

In fact, the Unified soccer team made national news when they were invited to the New Jersey State House to witness Governor Christie signing New Jersey Equity in Athletics and Physical Activities Act, P.L.2014 c.10, on June 19, 2014. The law requires schools to provide students with disabilities equal access to athlete, physical education and physical activities.

The Montgomery program extends beyond the school into the community through both their Play Unified Club and Unified Sports events. The Tuesday night Unified Sports program offers participation opportunities for students of all ages and abilities. It brought the Play Unified Club and program to the attention of students and parents in the elementary and middle school, which paved the way for the program to be introduced at those levels. The school entered a Unified Soccer team and bowling team in the Shriver Cup Championships, interscholastic Unified tournaments for Unified Champion High Schools in New Jersey, and they practice weekly with a pep rally scheduled before the tournaments. In addition, the Montgomery High School Play Unified Club participates in basketball leagues and run a Unified Volleyball and power lifting program at the school that includes SONJ athlete graduates.

The Montgomery High School Play Unified Club is fully inclusive. There is nearly a 50/50 ratio of students with and without intellectual disabilities on the club's leadership committee, and they work together as co-leaders. The students without disabilities make sure that all of the leadership activities are implemented so that the students with disabilities have a voice and equal and meaningful roles.

The school hosts monthly Play Unified Club activities during school, after school and on evenings and weekends. These include holiday events like pumpkin picking, a Thanksgiving dance and potluck dinner, Christmas shopping, egg hunts and back to school barbeques, which have allowed students to spend time with one another outside of school as well as during the school day.

The club meets weekly and invites new students to join at any time using posters and presentations to other school clubs such as Peer Leaders and Student Council. Three members of the Montgomery High School YAC serve on the State YAC, and one serves as the Chair. Further, students involved with the Play Unified Partnership are actively involved in the New School Mentor program.

The school hosts an annual Respect Week with a Disability Awareness Fair that runs every day during the week. They also sponsor a Cool School Plunge and Jingle All the Way 3K team as well as volunteer and participate as Fans in the Stands for state and league competition events.

The program at Montgomery High School reflects the integration of youth leadership, Unified Sports and whole school engagement. Further, they work extensively to take the program into the community, which provides additional opportunities for students with and without intellectual disabilities to interact while making a difference. This program's success has definitely been powered by the passion and vision of its youth leaders.

