

At the Department of Education presentation, I was asked to speak about the life changing impact of Project UNIFY. Below is a short summary of what I said:

When given inclusive experiences such as those through Project UNIFY, youth without disabilities are more likely to have positive interactions outside of class with their peers with disabilities. Unfortunately, when I was in school, these inclusive experiences weren't provided. But luckily I was able to provide them for myself. In Elementary School I started helping in the Special Education classroom once a week during my recess. When this quickly became an everyday occurrence, I was asked to become a partner with Special Olympics basketball. This was my first truly inclusive experience. I was able to play on the court, as an equal, with my peers of all abilities. This team was where I met one of my best friends, Kelley. From my friendship with Kelley and my involvement with Special Olympics, I knew that I wanted to help further the agenda the social justice agenda of Special Olympics. I had all of the passion, experience, and drive needed to make a difference, but I didn't have the necessary medium and support to do so.

Then, when I was a senior in high school, Project UNIFY was born. It is unlike any kind of youth leadership I have ever experienced. This is made possible because of the unique adults that somehow have the special ability to empower youth to truly make a difference and be a leader. They don't hand us step-by-step instruction for how to accomplish what they have envisioned. Instead, they allow youth to be the innovative minds that they naturally are, and create the steps to accomplish their goal. It has been seen time and time again that youth are most motivated and influenced by other youth and this is exactly why and how Project UNIFY makes an impact. It's a type of positive peer pressure. Youth are saying, "hey, look at how much fun we're having and how important it is to our school climate and society. You know you want to join!" And going even further than the school environment is the ability Project UNIFY has to break down stereotypes of youth, especially those with disabilities. It proves to adults and youth that youth don't just have to be the cute face, but that they can really be leaders and make a difference, regardless of abilities. It shows what all students can really accomplish when given the right support and encouragement.

Project UNIFY doesn't just create youth leaders. It creates lifelong leaders. Project UNIFY has not only fueled my passion for Special Olympics and the advocacy world, but it has also given me the tools, confidence, and empowerment I need to not only have a successful future career, but also to continue being a voice for advocacy. With Project UNIFY in schools, we are going to continue seeing more and more youth become strong leaders and lifelong voices for advocacy. With Project UNIFY in schools, we are going to see the change we want to see.