

Superintendent Engagement



Why School Superintendents Should Engage their Schools or School District in Special Olympics Project UNIFY®

Dr. William H. Hughes, Former Superintendent of Schools, Greendale School District.

Special Olympics Project UNIFY® is a strategy to activate youth to develop school communities where young people are agents of change - fostering respect, dignity and advocacy for people with intellectual disabilities by utilizing the sports and education programs and initiatives of Special Olympics. It consists of strategies to integrate Special Olympics programs with ongoing youth activities.

Project UNIFY® was implemented in 2008 – building on the Special Olympics platform of sports, games and events for individuals with intellectual disabilities and advancing school-based opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities to be successful and students without intellectual disabilities to gain awareness and understanding leading to advocacy for human rights and social justice.

In its first year, Special Olympics Programs launched Project UNIFY® in over 1,700 schools in 39 states; implementing one or more of the activities identified above. In all cases the strategies were implemented through quality collaboration with the state or local Special Olympics office.

According to the formal 2008 – 2009 evaluation report “Special Olympics Programs have taken the first step to create a new vision for how Special Olympics and schools can cooperatively work together and in doing so, move forward in promoting school communities of inclusion and acceptance.” In addition the evaluation team found that “There were schools that

sought the involvement of students with and without intellectual disabilities in planning and implementation of Project UNIFY® and the involvement of school-based groups.” This suggests that Project UNIFY® was viewed as an inclusive, school-wide initiative in many schools.

Now in its second year, Project UNIFY® has broadened its network to 45 states and nearly 2,000 schools and implemented many of the positive lessons learned from the first year experiences. In addition Project UNIFY® has enhanced its service-learning curriculum (Special Olympics Get Into It e-tools) and is hosting a National Education Conference engaging 250 teachers over a three-day period associated with the 2010 Special Olympics USA National Games in Nebraska.



PROJECT UNIFY® KEY CHARACTERISTICS

Project UNIFY® is committed to ensuring that the following characteristics of effective practice are in place and consistently achieved in schools.

- **Unifying Sports Programming**
A commitment to bring the diverse programs together focusing on school community and student development.
- **Youth Leadership**
Young people representing the diversity of the student body are engaged in leadership positions and schools acknowledge that youth leadership is a priority for the school/programs.
- **School - Community Collaborations**
Sustainable collaborations exist that mutually benefit the school and the community and are a core element of Project UNIFY® activities.
- **Creating and Sustaining Relationships**
A commitment to bring youth with and without disabilities together through programs so that all youth benefit and lasting friendships and relationships are formed.
- **Communications**
The new social networking media to young people is centered to all communication. Quality communications strategies are employed to inform and influence critical education stakeholders. In addition, communication and youth products are shared with networks that offer the greatest opportunity for suggested strategies to be considered and employed.
- **Professional Development**
Creating structured time for initiative practitioners to acquire and enhance knowledge and skills to effectively implement and sustain quality projects.
- **Continuous Improvement**
Sustainable formal teams focusing on using data for improvement. Teams consist of all stakeholders ensuring that data is analyzed and resulting “improvements” are appropriate and geared to program enhancement.

Project UNIFY® supports districts and schools as they establish partnerships with a high profile organization and national leaders. Superintendents will be attracted to the prestige of the leadership and founders and the reputation of Special Olympics to raise the inclusiveness of the district.

Project UNIFY® and Special Olympics will be seen as the catalyst for this work – similar to the Effective School Movement of the 1990’s and Professional Learning Community earlier in this decade. Special Olympics sports and related programs provide platforms for youth to understand and to value their peers with intellectual disabilities. It empowers and activates youth to create opportunities for and with them in sport, friendship and advocacy. This will create a shift in expectation and results for Special Olympics in public education and school districts.

Ways in Which Programing is Combined:

- **Pre-K/Elementary/Primary Schools –**
Young Athletes™, Get Into It® service-learning curriculum, Unify Day, researching information on the web/activities, art projects and Fans in the Stands with classmates and family members.
- **Secondary/Middle Schools –**
Unified Sports® teams, Get Into It® service-learning curriculum, Youth Summits and Rallies, Unify Day, Student led R-Word: social justice and advocacy campaign, guest speakers, website connections, essay contests, school assemblies, wellness campaigns tied to curriculum and Special Olympics activities.
- **Secondary/High Schools –**
Unified Sports® teams, Get Into It® service-learning curriculum, Unify Day, Games, Student led R- Word: social justice an advocacy campaigns, web-based friendships with national and international Special Olympics connections, essay contests, editorial writing, Youth Summits, Assemblies and Rallies, Youth Activation

committees, leadership roles in planning and implementing Special Olympics competition, mentoring middle school students, volunteering with Elementary School activities.

provide opportunities for dialogue with local funders who can unite with the local Special Olympics Program and school district around the values outlined in Project UNIFY® .

COLLABORATION

- Project UNIFY® will support Superintendents in the establishment of relationships between schools and local, regional and national Special Olympics Organizations.
- Project UNIFY® will support Superintendents in their ongoing drive for funding. Project UNIFY will model the investment of funds and human capital to build a culture of collaboration. Funding will be provided for a set period of time to establish practices of youth engagement. The principles and practices of the Special Olympics



SCHOOL CLIMATE

- Project UNIFY® focuses on changing school climate to be more inclusive, reduce impediments and sustain programs that can boost student achievement for all students as well as those with intellectual disabilities . School policy current focus is on academic competencies with little time for programs not focused on academic content.
- Project UNIFY® creates a delivery system with partners, places and methodologies that create a critical mass of youth and adult leaders in your community or school district. It helps focus competing priorities, fragmented services, unstable funding and low expectations for all students and youth including those with intellectual disabilities. Success stories will help break the complacency and low expectations for students with intellectual disabilities. It will also provide support and methods to improve the quality of life for students and families in the school community.
- Project UNIFY® provides coaching and tools to help school leaders and teachers think differently, act differently and act together. This will help young people, parents, teachers, school leaders, and policy makers bring precision to their passion, ensuring that all young people engage in an inclusive school environment.
- Project UNIFY® is a new way of doing business. It focuses on youth as leaders and major contributors to project design, implementation, evaluation and sustainability.
- Project UNIFY® provides a method to consolidate and align separate change-focused initiatives underway and focus on big goals.

COMMUNITY BUILDING

- Project UNIFY® will support Superintendents in establishing processes and methods to change school climate to create a school culture of inclusion, respect, and human dignity for all students in the school. An engaged student is connected to their school and the adults working with them.
- Project UNIFY® is a method to establish a collaborative group dedicated to youth service. Care providers, educators, government, faith-based and non-profit agency reps, and teen advisors who are concerned about the youth in our community can be brought together to share resources and organizations.
- Project UNIFY® supports state and community efforts to help youth by changing the way they build coalitions of youth including those with intellectual disabilities. It provides an entry point for school districts to find new partners where previously the school district has worked independently.
- Project UNIFY® will assist school leaders develop and sustain partnerships with Special Olympics at the local and regional level. Both will have an opportunity to collaborate on practices that sustain a climate of inclusion for all students rather than a specific methodology that is linked to Project UNIFY®. They must develop a sustaining climate of inclusion for all students and this is a methodology to accomplish this goal.
- Project UNIFY® will work schools to establish partnerships with local or regional Special Olympics programs. Special Olympics programming is often special events; more systemic integration needs to be done here. It is more effective to work with existing programs than attempt to create new programs that will compete for funding and attention.

RESOURCES

- Project UNIFY® is a unique conversation starter with those who are interested in student leadership, school climate. A successful partnership with Project UNIFY® and Special Olympics will support the school district's efforts to attract fiscal resources by expanding the opportunity for investment.
- This avoids the development of a dependency of a school district on Special Olympics for funding; freeing Special Olympics to fund other projects in the future. Project UNIFY® incentivizes schools to efforts that cost little and are more about skills, knowledge and dispositions of those in the schools and districts than a set purpose that ends with the loss of funding. It supports Special Olympics in their mission while schools improve school climate for all students.
- Project UNIFY® provides a method to consolidate separate change-focused initiatives, task forces and coalitions.



YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

- Project UNIFY® brings another mechanism to incorporate youth voice and leadership in school climates and at the district and community level to foster the acceptance of their peers with intellectual disabilities and impact attitudes of the entire group. Youth leaders are increasingly viewed as a process that enhances school community change. Improvements of school climate and change also create relationships and professional development for teachers.
- Project UNIFY® will provide teachers and school leaders structured time for initiative members to acquire and enhance knowledge and skills.



IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOLS

The best schools are finding that the main factors in improving student learning – especially those youth that are challenged or not working to expectation are those that are moving from a standardized educational program. These schools may not offer every opportunity that schools are known for. Rather, these schools are led by principals and teachers that are focused on student centric learning – where learning is increasingly customized to how each student learns best, where relationships and connections between teachers; students and authentic learning is routine, and where schools are more focused on creating op-

portunity and expectation for all students, not those who meet the mold of standardized education.

These practices and beliefs include setting high expectations and holding students to them for learning, behavior, attitudes and attention in class and the schoolhouse. Successful educators routinely adjust their teaching and practices with youth so they do learn and behave rather than accepting less than what is right or allowing them to underperform. They develop and acquire in partnership with youth, learning materials and lessons in place aligned with what is assessed in class, the grade level and school district. They give youth a voice and opportunities to contribute, through service, to their classroom, school and community so we are working together in a relationship of collaboration and authentic - meaningful learning.

Schools and community groups developing youth share a common goal of preparing them for a world, better than what we live in now. We will be living in a world that is better for all if we have an inclusive school environment that fosters equity, justice and engagement so that all students are active principled citizens and leaders today as well as tomorrow. The result is a world inclusive by nature and collaborative by practice. Project UNIFY® commits to these efforts and impacts. As Tim Shriver, Chairman and CEO of Special Olympics recently wrote about the words of his mother, “As we hope for the best in them, hope is reborn in us.”

SUMMARY

As a district superintendent, I understand the challenges districts and schools face to ensure quality education experiences for every student. Special Olympics Project UNIFY® provides a framework, philosophy and set of practices that engage all students in activities that improve achievement and lead to lifelong success.

Here are some next steps that any superintendent or district leader can readily begin to bring to scale in the schools they serve:

- Locate and watch the 3-word video and convene a discussion group with parents, teacher leaders, building principals and youth. Encourage the development of three words that support all students in school's attention to learning and connection to others. Support and find students and faculty that can create their own 3-word Video and post for the world to see and gauge. http://community.specialolympics.org/_3-word-Video-on-Special-Olympics/video/527699/82244.html
- Initiate discussion regarding the R-Word Campaign. Use resources from the Special Olympics Web site on this issue. Work with teacher and student groups to find resonance on this issue. Follow where the campaign takes you regardless of what leaders and loud voices in a community may say.
- Learn more about youth engagement, youth summits and work teams that address real issues identified by students in your community. Support teacher leaders in schools – they are there now practicing this work in classrooms and bring to scale in a school, grade level or department. Follow the advice and suggestions and build on first successes.
- Visit classrooms or schools where students with intellectual disabilities are attending school. Observe how youth are engaged together in work or projects that affect school climate and student connection to school. If you see evidence, build on it. If you don't see anything happening, ask why and see what can be done.
- Review school climate survey data of youth, faculty and parents through the lens of how students with intellectual disabilities are engaged in school. Seek evidence or indicators of youth voice and collaboration around school issues that impact intellectually disabled students in the school or district. If there is not any school climate survey data in the school look for classroom teachers or teams of faculty engaged in this work and build on it. Start surveying for school climate within six weeks if it is not in place. Include a component for special needs youth and youth voice in the operation of the school.
- Contact your local Special Olympics Office. Establish a relationship with local leaders and activists and move forward with a project with Special Olympics – you will find faculty and citizens in your district who are engaged now on their own. From this work, follow where it leads you to Project UNIFY®.

For More Information

More information on Special Olympics Project UNIFY® can be found at www.project-unify.org. You may also contact Andrea Cahn, Senior Director, Project UNIFY® at acahn@specialolympics.org or your state Special Olympics office http://www.specialolympics.org/program_locator.aspx.