



BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Special Olympics Project UNIFY® is an initiative that focuses on social inclusion¹, bringing youth with and without intellectual disabilities together through sports and related activities, providing them with the knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to create and sustain school communities where all young people are agents of change. It began in 2008 and is funded through the U.S. Department of Education in the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP). Project UNIFY takes a “whole school approach” to address social inclusion (in addition to academic and physical inclusion) in order to promote and support academic success and student engagement.

Project UNIFY is built on the premise that to have the greatest impact, change must start with young people. For years, Special Olympics has recognized the role that youth play in achieving the long-term societal goals of acceptance and inclusion. 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.”** By combining Special Olympics’ core sports initiatives with a number of complementary initiatives, Project UNIFY provides programming that promotes the inclusion of children and youth with intellectual disabilities in school and society. For example, the inclusive sports program Unified Sports® is complemented by education and social initiatives such as Special Olympics *Get Into It*® K-12 Lessons & Resources, Partners Clubs, Youth Activation Committees, and Youth Summits. School-wide activities include Youth Rallies and assemblies, *Fans in the Stands*, or campaigns such as the national *Spread the Word to End the Word* (R-Word) campaign.

The initiatives that make up Project UNIFY are grouped into three core components:

- 1) **Inclusive Sports** – provide students with and without intellectual disabilities opportunities to participate in sports activities alongside one another;
- 2) **Youth Leadership & Advocacy** – provide students with and without intellectual disabilities opportunities to take on leadership roles to promote Project UNIFY activities in the school and in the community; and
- 3) **Whole-School Engagement** – provide opportunities for *all* students in the school to participate in Project UNIFY through sustained school-wide activities.

Key characteristics of each component encompass: a) inclusive youth leadership; b) school/community collaborations; c) social networking and interactive communications; d) skill development and enhancement of educators through professional development; and e) continuous improvement. The following chart further identifies the initiatives in each component.

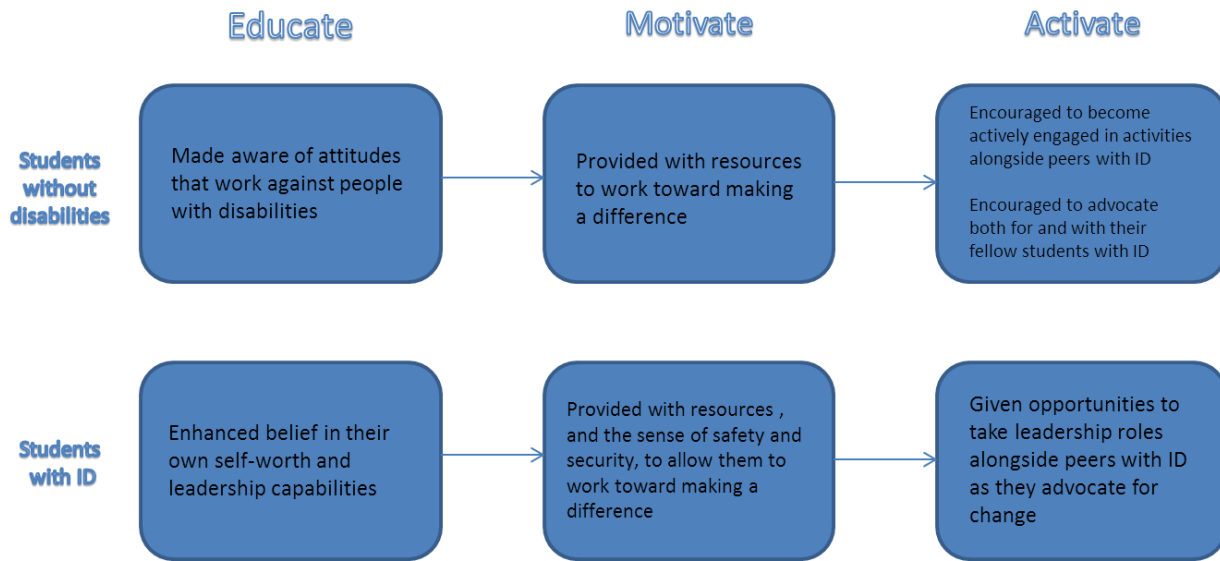
¹ For Project UNIFY, social inclusion means experiencing a sense of belonging; feeling that persons other than family and professionals care for, value, and desire to spend time with you; knowing that support will be available if it is needed. It is also having regular access to the community and those within it with whom one desires to associate. Additionally, it is the feeling of being a contributing part of a network of persons who one knows, who knows us, and who know each other (Special Olympics Project UNIFY).

Table 1. The Project UNIFY components and selected Project UNIFY activities

<p>1) Inclusive Sports</p> <p>Unified Sports® - a program that places athletes with intellectual disabilities and “partners” (athletes without intellectual disabilities) on the same team to compete in team sport and foster positive social interaction between individuals with and without intellectual disabilities .</p> <p>Unified Sports® Recreation - inclusive recreational sports opportunities for Special Olympics athletes and partners without disabilities. Unlike competitive Unified Sports, it does not follow any prescribed training, competition and/or team composition requirements.</p> <p>Unified Sports® Player Development – this model combines approximately equal number of Special Olympics athletes (individuals with intellectual disabilities) and partners (individuals without intellectual disabilities) as teammates on sports teams for training and competition. Teammates are not required to be of similar abilities and teammates of higher abilities serve as mentors.</p> <p>Young Athletes® - an early intervention motor skills development program for preschool and early elementary aged students that promotes motor skill development and provides the opportunity for positive social interaction between young children with and without intellectual disabilities.</p> <p>Camp Shriver – summer sports camps (originally started by Special Olympics founder Eunice Kennedy Shriver in 1962) that provide recreation and many opportunities for inclusiveness.</p> <p>Games & Tournaments - in addition to Unified Sports competitions, these can include school games and tournaments in which students both with and without intellectual disabilities compete.</p> <p>Volunteering & Coaching– Volunteers are at the heart of the Special Olympics movement. For young people, being a Special Olympics volunteer or assistant Unified Sports coach can become an integral part of their Project UNIFY experience.</p>
<p>2) Youth Leadership & Advocacy</p> <p>Partner’s Clubs – official school clubs focused on Project UNIFY, bringing students with and without intellectual disabilities together through sports, social and/or recreational activities.</p> <p>Youth Activation Committees – opportunities at both the state and national level for young people with and without intellectual disabilities to demonstrate and develop leadership.</p> <p>Youth Summits & Forums - where young people gather to share information, ideas, and energy to help promote, expand, and increase the impact of Project UNIFY and Special Olympics.</p> <p>Inclusive Leadership Programs – Project UNIFY gives students tools for creating a new model of leadership for school clubs and program, one in which students both with and without intellectual disability can attain and fulfill leadership roles.</p>
<p>3) Whole-School Engagement</p> <p>Get Into It® (GII) - online, downloadable resources that help teachers educate, motivate, and activate students. The companion Get Into It Active offers online resources designed for after-school programs, recess, PE classes, and more.</p> <p>Spread the Word Campaign - a youth-driven campaign to help eradicate the hurtful and harmful use of the R-Word (retard or retarded) and other language that diminishes others.</p> <p>Fans in the Stands - a way for students of all ages to support Special Olympics athletes, when direct interaction is not possible, by engaging the entire student body to cheer for their athlete peers with intellectual disabilities at events.</p>

Young people have a strong natural passion for social justice. Project UNIFY nurtures and focuses their enthusiasm by introducing them to the principles, practices, and experiences that have guided Special Olympics over the past 40 years. Employing a framework of *educate*, *motivate* and *activate*, Project UNIFY offers all students, with and without intellectual disabilities, opportunities to learn and work together toward goals of acceptance.

Figure 1. Educate, motivate, activate framework



EVIDENCE OF IMPACT

Project UNIFY involves as many as 1,700,000 youth and is actively involved in over 3,000 elementary, middle and high schools across 45 States. The project is raising the awareness about students with disabilities by providing opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities to get involved in school activities, and providing opportunities for students with and without intellectual disabilities to work together in socially inclusive activities.

The Center for Social Development and Education (CSDE) at the University of Massachusetts Boston carries out extensive annual evaluations of Project UNIFY. One of CSDE's goals has been to illustrate what Project UNIFY looks like in practice and the impact it has those involved. Each year, the evaluation has produced findings that have helped guide the developmental course of Project UNIFY, leading to more clearly defined parameters and guidelines for what constitutes a Project UNIFY school. Most recent findings show:

- 66% of Project UNIFY school liaisons (generally teachers) observe that Project UNIFY helps **raise awareness** about students with intellectual disabilities, and 63% observed that Project UNIFY **increases opportunities** for students with and without intellectual disabilities to work together.
- 82% of school liaisons said that Project UNIFY was **successful** in meeting at least some of its goals at their schools.
- 74% of participating students said the involvement with Project UNIFY was a **positive turning point** in their lives.
- 76% of students felt they became **more patient**, and 78% said they learned to **compromise** better.
- 65% of students felt they learned they **have things in common** with their peers with intellectual disabilities.
- 95% of students said that their school should **continue Project UNIFY** next year.

CASE STUDY

Case studies are just as important to understanding the impact of Project UNIFY as formal evaluations. The following is a portion of the Executive Summary from a recent case study of Project UNIFY's impact in four high schools in Oregon. Similar results are occurring wherever Project UNIFY is a central part of the school.

This case study project sought to address the following key question: What impact has Project UNIFY had on students with intellectual disabilities? To understand impact, Project UNIFY staff defined what behaviors, attitudes and/or actions reflect impact in three areas. The results are as follows:

*"I feel that before Project UNIFY many students with disabilities (for the most part) were ignored and/or overlooked. But with it, there are many opportunities for interactions and many friendships formed that wouldn't be there otherwise."
—Sutherlin student*

1. Progress Toward Overall Project Goal. All four schools met Project UNIFY's overall program goal of promoting dignity and respect and advocating for people with intellectual disabilities. Students, staff, parents, and/or administrators provided specific examples during interviews. Each school had numerous stories to share, including: a Parkrose student with intellectual disabilities received a standing ovation after singing in the school talent show; a Rainier student with intellectual disabilities was named Winter Ball Queen alongside a student without intellectual disabilities who was a football player; students with intellectual disabilities at Forest Grove performed with students without intellectual disabilities in a school-wide performance of a play on bullying; and after the R-Word Campaign at Sutherlin, many students without intellectual disabilities and teachers reportedly shared having a new understanding of why inclusion is so important.

This suggests that Project UNIFY is shifting the school culture toward one of overall acceptance. Students with intellectual disabilities who were once sitting alone at "their" lunch table are now a part of the school.

2. Project UNIFY activities will encourage social interactions between students with and without intellectual disabilities.

Across all schools, there was evidence that Project UNIFY encouraged social interactions between students with and without intellectual disabilities. They eat lunch together, go to movies, and join in other social activities. Interactions need an incubator space, and Project UNIFY's Partners Club and Unified Sports® provide that space.

3. Students with intellectual disabilities will be included in the school community. Data suggest that the more years a school is engaged with Project UNIFY, the more likely it is that students with intellectual disabilities will participate in school activities such as committees and clubs. For example, Forest Grove and Sutherlin have both been involved in Project UNIFY since its inception. They also had the highest number of students with intellectual disabilities involved with school activities such as student council, school committees and other school-related activities. In comparison Rainier and Parkrose have fewer years in Project UNIFY, and fewer students with intellectual disabilities reported being involved with school activities.

*"UNIFY has opened up the eyes of everyone to WANT to show respect, dignity and advocate for what they believe is right."
—Rainier Student*

Special Olympics Project UNIFY at a glance:

- 3,000 Schools
- 45 States
- 1,770,000 Young People exposed
- 10,500 Young Athletes (aged 2-7) participants.
- 59,000 Unified Sports participants in schools (with and without ID aged 8-20 yrs.)
- 42,000 Youth Leaders

Two key unexpected outcomes were revealed in this project:

1. **Social interactions for parents of students with intellectual disabilities increased.** Parents of students with intellectual disabilities at Forest Grove reported that Project UNIFY gave them much-needed opportunities to connect with other parents, thereby increasing their own social interactions.

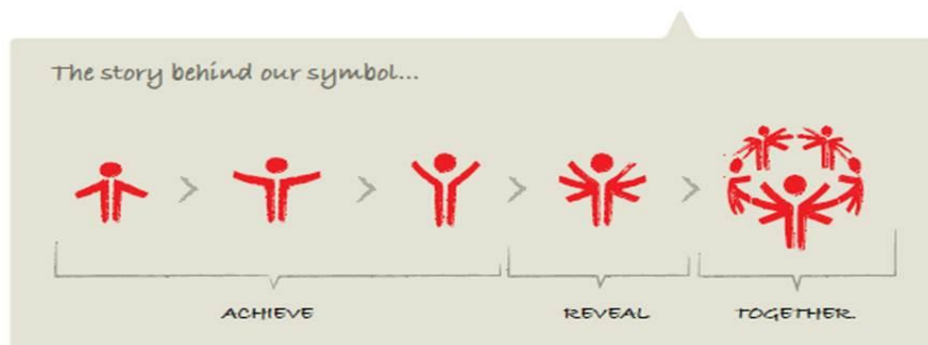
2. **Project UNIFY inspired a social justice program.** Rainier reported that Project UNIFY inspired the implementation of a whole new program at the school titled "Exceptional Child." The program addresses issues of social justice by giving students without intellectual disabilities the opportunity to earn credit assisting a student with intellectual disabilities with reading, learning and overall peer support.

The following three key elements of success were identified in this project:

1. **Engage students without intellectual disabilities:** Provide students without intellectual disabilities the opportunity to coordinate, plan and/or lead Project UNIFY activities. By having a large group of students at multiple grade levels, the student leadership can continue to be passed from year to year without losing knowledge on how to implement activities.
2. **Share leadership:** Distribute Project UNIFY tasks (such as coordinating volunteers, paperwork, and so on) among at least two school staff members.
3. **Supportive administrators:** The role of the administrator is to authorize activities, help secure funds, and provide overall support to staff and student leadership as they implement Project UNIFY activities.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR ENGAGEMENT

The graphic below depicts the story behind the Special Olympics' symbol-- achievement, change, revelation and community. As an inclusive, community-based organization, Special Olympics understands that strength comes from collaboration and support. These are the same attributes that we achieve when we work together to address important issues in the education of our students.



While much has been achieved since the inception of Project UNIFY in 2008, we still have a great distance to go before all students are active members of “school communities where **all** young people are agents of change for persons with intellectual disabilities and where school climates promote acceptance, respect and human dignity for all.” The ideas and input of others is critical to make these schools and opportunities realities for all students.

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