



A Framework for Socially Inclusive Schools

Project UNIFY's Operational Guidelines for Promoting Social Inclusion



Special Olympics
Project UNIFY®

Introduction

This resource document was created to describe the Special Olympics Project UNIFY® conceptual framework for providing leadership and guidance to educators, students, communities and advocates in promoting successful, socially inclusive practices. The seven elements of our framework also form the lens through which we organize, conduct and evaluate our own efforts toward creating and sustaining inclusive schools and communities.

To what extent does our school **FOSTER PHYSICAL AND SOCIAL INTERACTION** of diverse students through purposeful actions?

What evidence do we have that **WE ARE SUCCESSFUL** or need more work?

After looking at these questions, do you feel there is a gap between the goal of social inclusion and your current practice? How would your students answer these questions?

Special Olympics Project UNIFY: What Is It?

Special Olympics Project UNIFY is a program that engages schools in creating school climates of inclusion, acceptance, respect and human dignity for all students with and without intellectual disabilities.

The initiatives that make up Project UNIFY are grouped into three core components: **Inclusive Sports**, which provide students with and without intellectual disabilities opportunities to participate in sports activities alongside one another; **Youth Leadership & Advocacy**, where students of all abilities are given opportunities to take on leadership roles to promote inclusive activities in their school and community; and **Whole-School Engagement**, giving opportunities to all students in the school to participate and be exposed to messages and experiences of authentic inclusion through sustained school-wide awareness and education activities.

Special Olympics Project UNIFY builds on Special Olympics' values, principles, practices, experiences and impacts. This approach incorporates Special Olympics sports and related activities, yet this new way of operating requires a shift in current programs and paradigms from a focus on events to committing to a movement advocating for youth as change agents now and in the future.

Why Is Social Inclusion Important?

Special Olympics describes "social inclusion" as a component of inclusive education that relies on students having frequent opportunities to interact with a broad range of peers in a variety of settings within and outside the classroom setting. This document further challenges that unless students have both structured and unstructured opportunities within which to grow diverse peer relationships, the social setting will always remain an exclusive environment.

*Learn more about Unified Sports® on the Special Olympics website!
<http://specialolympics.org>*

The focus of Special Olympics Project UNIFY is to create socially inclusive schools where all students are encouraged and supported to be agents of change, have opportunities to be leaders, participate in school activities, and are encouraged to engage in collaborative activities such as Unified Sports® (teams composed of both special education and general education students). All students deserve the opportunity to actively participate in engaging school and community environments that recognize and share their gifts.

A socially inclusive school climate fosters inclusion, acceptance, respect and human dignity for all students and is based on the foundational belief that the school's purpose is to educate, motivate and activate students (see Figure 1). It is a school where students who require extra support receive it without separation from their peers. It is a place where no student is excluded because of the degree or type of disability or the services required to meet his/her needs.

Educate. Providing high quality opportunities and supports for all students to acquire and enhance knowledge and skills associated with school and life success

Motivate. Creating conditions that engage students and empower them to take a particular action

Activate. Establishing opportunities for students to organize and take action that addresses a community issue or problem



Figure 1. Essential Attributes of Quality Education

Inclusiveness should not be an option for schools, but rather a commitment and core value to ensure equitable access and success for all students and adults.

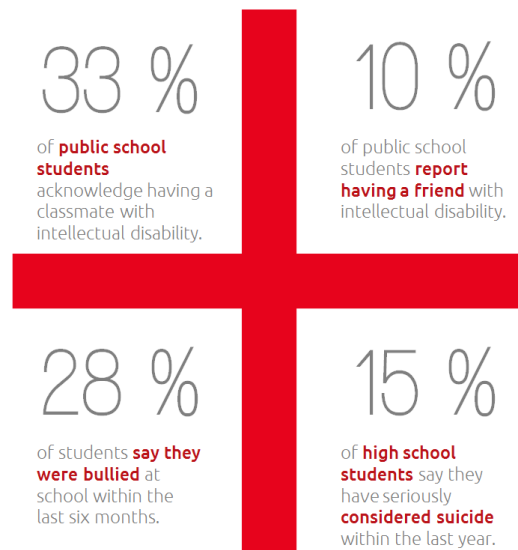


Figure 2. Social Inclusion Statistics

This position is supported by the practical experience of many educators who note the creation of these social opportunities must be planned and purposeful, especially in the early stages. In their 1998 monograph, Gail McGregor and Timm Vogelsberg noted: “students with disabilities demonstrate high levels of social interaction in settings with their typical peers, *but placement alone does not guarantee positive social outcomes*” (p. 57).

From a broad perspective, there is a disconnect for many students from the social life of the school to a sense of belonging in the school community. Below are a few compelling statistics (Siperstein, Parker, Bardon, & Widaman, 2007).

- 28% of students say they were bullied at school within the last six months.
- Only 55% of high school students feel they are important to their school community.
- 15% of high school students say they have seriously considered suicide within the past year.


In a report authored by the Center for Disease Control (CDC), titled “School Connectedness: Strategies for increasing Protective Factors Among Youth,” a strong argument exists for

creating schools where every student feels a sense of belonging. The authors of this report define school connectedness as “the belief held by students that adults and peers in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals” (p. 3).

Without this school connectedness, students are more likely to engage in harmful activities such as smoking, alcohol or drug use; gang involvement or early sexual initiation. The overall message of this report centers on the importance of avoiding or minimizing these “risk factors” in the lives of children and youth through increased attention to certain “protective” factors. In their words, “protective factors are individual or environmental characteristics, considerations or behaviors that reduce the effects of stressful life events; increase an individual’s ability to avoid risks or hazards; and promote social and emotional competence to thrive in all aspects of life now and in the future” (p. 3).

Specifically, the CDC identified four factors that increase school connectedness: adult support from school staff; belonging to a positive peer group; commitment to education and the realization of its importance to their future; and the physical and psychosocial environment of the school. From this list, it is easy to see how school connectedness and social inclusion are closely related to the same positive outcomes for students and their families and are necessary conditions of support.



 Figure 3. Four Factors that Increase School Connectedness

Current Practices

Current data regarding inclusive practices in schools suggests that while progress has been made, much work remains. According to the most recent Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), only 53.7% of all students with disabilities spend 80% or more of the school day with their nondisabled peers. The statistics are significantly less encouraging for students with intellectual disabilities, where only 16% of these students spend 80% or more of their day in the general education setting.

National data also verifies that the achievement gap and graduation rates between students with disabilities and their nondisabled peers pose a vital and growing concern for many states.

Among the qualities and complexities of social inclusion, Special Olympics Project UNIFY promotes:

- *a focus on the mutual and reciprocal learning that takes place when all children are engaged in meaningful social and academic opportunities;*
- *dependence not only on services for people with intellectual disabilities, but also on the attitudes and actions of children with no disability;*
- *a focus on the classroom, the informal culture of the school and the extent to which the climate of the school is one of high expectations and acceptance for all children; and*
- *the creation of authentic communities where every gift is valued and every member’s contribution is integrated.*

Unfortunately, many schools fall short of achieving a vision of social inclusion. In these schools, students with and without intellectual disabilities do not have opportunities to develop positive relationships, decreasing the chance they will develop friendships and respect for each other. Students with an intellectual disability continue to suffer from bullying and social exclusion. Often, students with an intellectual disability lack leadership opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge and skills and are routinely thought incapable of serving in prominent roles. There is little focus on their gifts or range of accomplishments.

“How can we reform our current education system to equitably and justly provide quality opportunities for all students?”

Inclusion as a Core Value

Inclusive schools, according to the Inclusive Schools Network™, are built on a strong philosophical belief that all children can learn and be successful within a shared school environment. Culturally responsive educational strategies, differentiated instruction and positive behavioral supports are just a few of the bedrock practices employed in successful inclusive schools. Inclusive education should be a universal commitment and a core value to ensure equitable access and success for students and adults.

Special Olympics Project UNIFY promotes social inclusion in schools to ensure special education and general education students are equitably engaged and teachers and students collaborate to create supportive classrooms, activities and opportunities.

Three Broad Components of Inclusive Practices

If we are to achieve authentic inclusion in our schools, we must move our practice beyond piecemeal efforts and circumstantial opportunities. It is imperative that schools intentionally nurture and sustain a school climate that expects and encourages inclusive practices from all students and staff. A school that expects, encourages and supports inclusive practices is a critical underpinning to the establishment of an equitable learning environment for all students. The **school climate** creates the necessary conditions under which diversity is valued, equity is demanded, and every student is a contributing member.

Nested within an inclusive school climate are three broad components of inclusive practices.



 Figure 4. Three Broad Components of Inclusive Practices

Physical inclusion is assured in a setting in which all students have equitable access to all facilities, services and activities. Students with disabilities are members of their neighborhood school community and of the general education classroom.

Academic inclusion engages diverse students in the teaching-learning process of the general education classroom. Rigorous curriculum standards, research-based instructional strategies and high expectations characterize academic inclusion. Success is measured through high levels of achievement for all students.

Social inclusion ensures that all students have the opportunity for the development of authentic friendships with a broad range of their peers in a variety of settings. Students assume leadership roles to positively change their school and community. Acceptance and belonging are considered civil rights for all students within the context of social justice.

The majority of previous school efforts were directed toward addressing physical and academic inclusion. The remaining challenge is to ensure socially inclusive practices in all schools.

The Project UNIFY Framework

Special Olympics Project UNIFY has identified seven key characteristics, or elements, of socially inclusive learning environments (see Figure 5). Examples of priority actions to promote each of these elements are included in the following sections. The interaction of all seven elements of the framework enriches the learning environment and provides quality opportunities for all students to be full members of the school community.

These seven elements of the Project UNIFY framework for social inclusion are categorized as **Core Processes** or **Operational Processes**. While each has equal importance to the success of efforts to promote socially inclusive schools, these two broad functions simplify the use of the model.

The four core processes speak to the unique aspects of the work of social inclusion including:

- Establishing a vibrant role for **youth leadership**;
- Creating and sustaining **positive relationships** for students with intellectual disabilities and their peers so that abilities, rather than perceived limitations, create more meaningful bonds;
- Designing **unified programs** that do not set old boundaries of separation but eliminate them in favor of shared activities, events and goals; and
- Creating school, family and community **partnerships** that promote safe, nurturing and inclusive environments.

The remaining three elements are labeled operational processes because they represent tasks that are essential to any organization in effectively implementing and sustaining a priority action. They are particularly important to schools and communities seeking to create socially inclusive relationships among diverse students.



Figure 5. The Project UNIFY Framework for Socially Inclusive Schools

References

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. School Connectedness: Strategies for Increasing Protective Factors Among Youth. Atlanta, GA: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; 2009.
- U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, Office of Special Education Programs, 30th Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2008, Washington, D.C., 2011.
- McGregor, G. & Vogelsberg, R.T. (1998). Inclusive schooling practices: Pedagogical and research foundations: A synthesis of the literature that informs best practices about inclusive schooling. University of Montana.
- Siperstein, G.N., Parker, R.C., Norius Bardon, J., & Widaman, K.F. (2007). A national study of youth attitudes toward the inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities. *Exceptional Children*, 73(4), 435-455.

Youth Leadership

For years, Special Olympics has recognized the role that youth play in achieving long-term societal goals of acceptance and inclusion. Special Olympics Project UNIFY is built upon the premise that in order to have the greatest impact, the change process must start with young people. Special Olympics considers young people to be the most powerful and effective advocates of social inclusion and acceptance. In keeping with this belief, one of Project UNIFY's main goals is to foster youth leadership, providing students with opportunities to have a voice and take an active, leading role in their schools and beyond.

Special Olympics believes through sports and sports-related programming, young people can make a difference in friendships, schools and communities. Project UNIFY is youth driven, with youth leadership teams at the national, state and school levels working together to develop strategies promoting school communities where all young people are agents of change.

Youth leaders demonstrate to policymakers, education leaders, practitioners and others that not only **can** youth provide leadership, but youth **should** provide leadership. Project UNIFY's focus on youth engagement ensures that the next generation of citizens acquires and enhances the knowledge and skills necessary to be effective leaders.

Inclusive youth leadership requires adults to create the conditions necessary for youth to understand how to effectively lead and acquire the skills required to actually lead. When youth leadership is the focus, the role of the adult is redefined as "adult ally," a role that allows adults to support and empower students.

"All young people should be given a voice to make meaningful change."



"Students with disabilities are establishing friendships that they never had before ... experiences they've never had before."

--Teacher Liaison

What Does it Look Like?

Youth with and without disabilities serve on inclusive leadership committees, Youth Activation Committees or Partners Clubs; collaborate as officers on school councils or clubs; plan and facilitate youth summits, rallies and school assemblies; serve as team leaders on Unified Sports teams; serve on Special Olympics state and local organizing committees; and serve as volunteers and leaders for Special Olympics and other programs.

When youth leadership is central to the school's culture, the following attributes will be in evidence.

Attributes of Youth Leadership in Schools

- *Opportunities for credible relationships exist among student peers, general and special education teachers, school leaders and administrators, and community members.*
- *All young people, regardless of ability or achievement level, are given a voice to make meaningful changes in their classrooms, schools and communities.*
- *Youth of every ability level are given opportunities and means to execute their decisions and to be leaders and agents of change in their communities.*
- *There is access, opportunity and encouragement for all youth to fulfill leadership positions within the school.*
- *Students co-develop, maintain and are accountable for inclusive climates and physical environments in their classrooms, schools and communities.*
- *Adults model the attitudes, skills and efforts required of leadership and provide opportunities to empower youth to be leaders.*

Elementary School Example

Preschool students with learning disabilities at Liberty Elementary School learned and taught yoga to their fellow students. They became leaders in the classroom and helped other students learn to work together. While gaining skills that would help them overcome personal difficulties, all students gained an understanding of how to work together, helping each other become successful.

This inclusive opportunity provided a welcoming environment for students of all abilities to benefit from learning yoga practices. Students with and without intellectual disabilities, as well as students with significant physical challenges, learned movements that increased their awareness of self, enhanced muscle control, and gained flexibility.

Through these shared experiences with yoga, the overall classroom became a calmer, more collaborative environment with sharing, working with others and teamwork rating off the charts. Every child in the class scored

proficient or higher in these areas, and the class became a nurturing environment for all.

Middle School Example

Students at Merry Middle School took the lead in helping their peers learn about acceptance, differences and what it means to be an inclusive school. Through a new school club, students implemented a variety of activities aimed at raising awareness of equity and respect.

The effort began when a group of general education students started sitting with students with disabilities at lunch. Together, they decided to start a Partners Club, where students with and without disabilities meet once a week to eat lunch, play outdoor games, practice sports, or engage in a variety of activities (e.g., arts and crafts, cooking, table games).

The need for this effort was identified and subsequently led by youth as a way of engaging all students in a variety of shared experiences. The success of these efforts at Merry Middle School led to an agreement to conduct a Unified Sports program throughout the entire district.

High School Example

Based on interviews with several youth and teachers, district staff created the “Exceptional Child” course to provide ongoing opportunities for students with and without disabilities to interact, teach and assist others. During this course, students assisted their fellow students and worked with elementary students, earning full credit for this work. Students assisted each other in academic exercises, supported each other socially, and developed friendships.

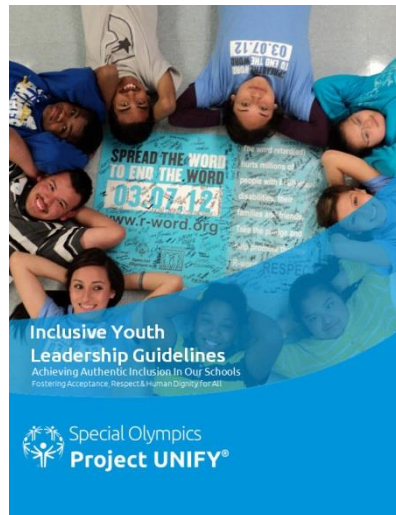
As a result of these experiences and his leadership skills, Jason, a student with autism, was elected to be a member of the student government body, where he assisted in making decisions regarding student activities.

Priority Actions

To increase the level of implementation of youth leadership in your school, consider the following action steps.

Select one or more Priority Actions to focus on this year:

- Engage leadership, staff, students and community in the development and implementation of school policies.
- Involve members of the school community as active partners in governance and participation in school-wide improvement efforts.
- Create a Student Leadership Team on each high school and middle school campus that meets on a regular basis, providing input on school climate issues.
- Provide leadership opportunities to students from all backgrounds and skill capabilities at the district and school levels.
- Ensure that student diversity is reflected in school councils, clubs and student activities and students are engaged as members on leadership and decision making.
- Develop classroom rules through a collaborative process in which all students are involved and have a voice.
- Establish processes whereby all students contribute to a shared vision of an inclusive school climate and assist in its measurement, analysis and continuous improvement.
- Establish processes and norms for every faculty member to identify the gifts and talents of all students and provide each student with the opportunity to demonstrate leadership based on their interests, skills and talents.
- Schedule formal and informal opportunities to gain direction from youth in your school.



 Check out the "Inclusive Youth Leadership Guidelines" from Special Olympics Project UNIFY for more information on creating youth leadership programs in your school!

Resources

Is Student Engagement Easier Said Than Done?

<http://www.cascadeeducationalconsultants.com/blog.php?id=1642081387133224678>

Movies That Move

http://media.specialolympics.org/soi/files/resources/Schools_Youth/2011-Leaders-Guide.pdf

Project UNIFY Youth Activation Committee Toolkit

http://media.specialolympics.org/soi/files/resources/Project_Unify/YACToolkit.pdf

Get Into It®

<https://getintoit.specialolympics.org/>

Upstander Alliance. National School Climate Center

<http://www.schoolclimate.org/bullybust/upstander>

Stages of Implementation

Throughout this document, stages of implementation rubrics provide a more detailed description of each element of the “Framework for Socially Inclusive Schools.” Rubrics offer many benefits to support the move from theory to actual practice. First, the rubrics contained in this document offer a clear view of the progression from novice to highly inclusive practice. Second, rubrics provide a simple format to enable assessment of the progress your school has made toward a socially inclusive environment. The next steps and desired end result for each element are easily identified. Finally, by studying the column on the far right, we have a clear picture of what success looks like.

Element I/Core Process #1

Youth Leadership Stages of Implementation

Novice	Emerging	Accomplished	Highly Inclusive
<p>Student leaders are represented by a narrow range of the student population.</p> <p>Non-disabled students work with adults to create a more inclusive school.</p> <p>Decisions are made by adults.</p>	<p>Youth are represented on school committees and decision making processes.</p> <p>Youth with and without disabilities are given parallel opportunities in separate settings to provide leadership in their school.</p> <p>Decisions are made by adults with youth input.</p>	<p>There is a common understanding that youth of every ability can be leaders in their communities.</p> <p>Youth with and without disabilities share leadership in school groups and committees in unified settings.</p> <p>Decision making is shared by youth and adults.</p>	<p>Student leadership positions are held by a diverse representation of the student body with all students being supported and provided the necessary skills to be agents of change in their communities.</p> <p>Students and adults share leadership in creating and maintaining an inclusive climate and physical environment in their school.</p> <p>All students are prepared for leadership roles by being given opportunities to learn and practice decision making and executing their decisions as agents of change in their schools and communities.</p> <p>Decisions are made on behalf of all youth.</p> <p>Youth engage in assessments, evaluations and reflections to examine their leadership knowledge, skills and impacts on themselves and others.</p>

Creating and Sustaining Relationships

It is clear from research conducted by Special Olympics and other organizations around the world that, in general, young people view persons with intellectual disabilities as having limited capabilities and not likely as peers, friends or collaborators. Research also shows that these attitudes can be changed through familiarity, interaction and involvement.

We have strong and irrefutable evidence that Special Olympics sports and related programs provide platforms for youth to understand and value their peers with intellectual disabilities. Further, they empower and activate youth to create opportunities for and with their schoolmates in sports, friendship and advocacy.

Schools often provide little opportunity for relationships, friendships and understanding to flourish with students separated into different classes and separate wings; free time that does not overlap; and schedules designed for convenience and not authentic relationship building. Even the budding relationships formed on the playing field of Unified Sports cannot be sustained if there are no other times during the school day for students to interact.

“Schools often provide little opportunity for relationships, friendships and understanding to flourish....”

Special Olympics Project UNIFY is an innovative response to this unequivocal research, showing Special Olympics local programming can contribute to eradicating the social and environmental walls to inclusion that students with intellectual disabilities continue to face.

What Does It Look Like?

Relationships between peers with and without intellectual disabilities created through Project UNIFY and inclusive activities are cultivated and sustained through a variety of interactions in classrooms, cafeterias, afterschool settings and free periods. These experiences ensure the social benefits and potential for real and long-term friendships.

Attributes of Creating and Sustaining Relationships in Schools

- *School staff provides regular and frequent activities in which adults and youth work together to solve problems and learn together, promoting a collaborative climate.*
- *School staff provides high-quality opportunities for students with and without intellectual disabilities to work together for the benefit of all.*
- *School staff ensures that all students in the school receive instruction that meets their individual skill levels, learning styles and engagement levels.*
- *School staff eliminates physical barriers and creates an environment that is physically accessible, safe and supportive for all.*
- *A climate of trust and respect, which honors the diverse talents, perspectives and assets of all students, is pervasive throughout the school and district.*

- *School staff creates opportunities for building relationships developed in classrooms and in social and after-school settings.*
- *School counselors, social workers and school nurses use their unique skills and talents to encourage friendships across all students and promote student leadership successes.*

Elementary School Example

At Centerfield Elementary School, a student with an intellectual disability had a difficult time appropriately engaging in activities during recess. Several other students in his class noticed the problem and came to the teacher. During their discussion, the peers expressed an interest in helping the student have a more positive experience on the playground.

Working with the rest of their class, the students researched, learned and organized a variety of non-competitive games that could be played at recess. Then, these second graders set up a schedule in which a pair of students would take responsibility for organizing one of the games and ensuring that all of the students in their class had an opportunity to play.

The physical education teacher learned about the students' efforts and decided to infuse more inclusive strategies into her classes. She sought opportunities to incorporate activities that highlighted the strengths of a broad spectrum of students and increased the use of activities that encouraged collaboration. These strategies began to work their way into other classes, providing students with rich opportunities to work with, and learn from, each other—and form friendships.


Middle School Example

Teachers at Northside Middle School and district personnel who were concerned about the lack of opportunities for students with and without intellectual disabilities to work together formed a learning community to address the issue. The physical education curriculum specialist; adaptive physical

education teachers; and staff working on bullying, character education and service-learning met to learn more about inclusive education.

One of the teachers in this group began using clips from *Movies That Move* to spark discussion in her inclusive classroom about the power of words, acceptance and youth leadership. The general education teacher in the classroom next door overheard the students as they shared their excitement about the clips and brainstormed alternate scenarios and responses from the characters. She asked to borrow the DVD to use with her class.

The teacher in the inclusive classroom suggested that a unified pair of her students take the DVD over to the other classroom. The teacher and students set up a plan that included having the students introduce the activity to the class and share their experiences, their learning and the value the discussions had in improving relationships in their classroom by creating a more inclusive community.



Check out the online resource *Movies That Move* and the teacher discussion guides!

<http://filmclipsonline.com/unify/>

High School Example

School-based businesses are a foundational part of Meadowview High School. Students participating in the Youth Transitions Program (YTP) work to develop employability skills and employment experiences while reminding the community of the value of all students and their contributions.

Students in the programs made soap that was sold in local businesses, participated in many

other projects, and made other products to sell at school. The YTP students, typically those most likely to be in Life Skills classes, teamed with the school's leadership students to run the student store at school. The YTP students made greeting cards and balloon arrangements to sell, and leadership students made coffee drinks in the student store. Students with and without disabilities worked together to count back change and balance the books.

By capitalizing on the individual strengths of each student, YTP participants learned that everyone has something valuable to offer, and more is achieved through a collaborative process. Everyone benefits from inclusive practices when we all learn to value and respect each other.

"Project UNIFY is one of the greatest programs I have seen. The general education students love it. They work hand in hand with the [special education] students fostering many relationships for these children... I love this program."

--Teacher Liaison



Priority Actions

To establish programs that create and sustain relationships in your school, consider the following actions.

Select one priority action to focus on this year.

- Create formal opportunities for special and general education teachers to plan, implement and sustain collaboration.
- Ensure extra-curricular activities and school programs are designed to initiate and support relationships between students with and without disabilities.
- Design school schedules to support the interaction of students with curricular and extra-curricular activities and daily programs.

Resources

It's Our School, Too!

http://media.specialolympics.org/soi/files/resources/Project_Unify/Its_Our_School_Too%20Script.pdf

Movies That Move

http://media.specialolympics.org/soi/files/resources/Schools_Youth/2011-Leaders-Guide.pdf

Play Unified, Live Unified

http://www.specialolympics.org/unified_sports.aspx

Get Into It[®]

<https://getintoit.specialolympics.org/>

Unified Sports[®]

http://www.specialolympics.org/Sections/Sports-and-Games/Unified_Sports.aspx

Creating and Sustaining Relationships Stages of Implementation

Novice	Emerging	Accomplished	Highly Inclusive
<p>Students' pre-conceptions and stereotypes about students with intellectual disabilities are not challenged.</p> <p>Multiple perspectives are not intentionally sought or incorporated into the learning environment.</p> <p>Limited steps are taken to ensure the school provides a physically inclusive setting.</p>	<p>Students with and without intellectual disabilities are afforded frequent opportunities to interact in social and academic settings.</p> <p>Instructional strategies are utilized that provide differentiated instruction to allow students with diverse learning needs to receive instruction together.</p>	<p>There is a caring, respectful and compassionate community within the school to create supportive relationships for all families, youth and adults.</p> <p>The skills, abilities and perspectives of all students are valued and respected by staff and school/district leaders.</p> <p>Opportunities are sought to engage a broad range of students, parents, staff and members of the community in the ongoing work of the school.</p>	<p>The school staff actively encourages and sustains a sense of community among all students that promotes student engagement and relationships within and beyond the school setting.</p> <p>All students, staff, parents and the broader community are viewed as equal partners in creating and sustaining an inclusive school community.</p> <p>Policy development and decisions at the school and district levels intentionally incorporate diverse perspectives and seek to have a positive impact on creating and sustaining an inclusive learning environment.</p>

Unifying Programming

Over the years, Special Olympics has designed and implemented programs focused on youth and schools. One challenge is that these programs have operated as independent entities, or silos, within the organization, reducing the opportunity to maximize the contribution each program can make to others. Special Olympics Project UNIFY organizes these various school-focused programs into a single coordinated set of offerings that more effectively and efficiently engage and motivate students.

Schools often face the challenge of making subjects interconnect to provide students with a greater understanding of broad principles and an attainment of the 21st Century skills needed to be productive citizens, valuable employees and well-rounded members of family and community. Some schools and educators meet this need with theme weeks, project-based learning or interdisciplinary units.

There is also a pressing need to ensure education is relevant to the lives of students, now and in the future. Research has shown that to overcome Special Olympics' own relevancy gap with the public, we need a shift that positions Special Olympics as **important**, not just nice; a **movement**, not just a series of events; and **relevant** to all of us, not just to "them." As students see the connections between experiences and education, they are able to apply knowledge to situations that exist today and arise tomorrow. Special Olympics programs orient education to become more content and context relevant. Through this process, education will be enhanced and learning facilitated.

"There is a pressing need to ensure education is relevant to the lives of students, now and in the future."

Project UNIFY believes that by tying the experiences in inclusive sports to youth leadership opportunities and education-based lessons in class and in school activities, the relevancy of the experience is increased.

"I made two friends [playing Unified basketball]. I see them in Unified P.E., [and] I see them going to classes and on my way to class. We talk about fun activities."

--High School Student



What Does it Look Like?

There are combinations of sports, youth leadership and service-learning opportunities; multiple Special Olympics and school initiatives and activities are combined for higher impact; and lessons in understanding difference, the power of words and what it means to be a leader are offered in class through Get Into It[®]. The means to practice those lessons are offered in youth leadership clubs and inclusive sports opportunities. Youth, school sports and extra-curricular programming become an integral part of all activities, strategies, programming, outreach and leadership opportunities.

Attributes of Unifying Programming

- *Access and opportunities are provided regularly for students with and without intellectual disabilities to participate together in sports and other engagement activities.*
- *Academic and non-academic activities are often connected, and the relevancy of their connectedness is highlighted.*
- *Various school and community programs (e.g., Young Athletes, Unified Sports, Partners Clubs, Honor Society, Student Council) are coordinated for consistency in developing each student's potential.*
- *School leaders can articulate and point to programs that build inclusiveness in their school or district.*
- *School leaders create an inclusive culture, showcasing the work and achievements of all, creating unified programs, and eliminating boundaries between students.*
- *Student clubs and activities consistently work toward being inclusive and welcoming for all students.*

Elementary School Example

Prairie Elementary School worked hard to create a positive climate of acceptance. Through Project P.I.R.A.T.E.S. (Please Include Respect and Treasure Every Student), a student in general education was paired with a student with an intellectual disability to help them have success in the general education environment. The academic partners also participated in recess activities together and began to form true friendships through their interactions.

Student partners worked together to design t-shirts that they wore to special events--and wore with great pride. The t-shirts often prompted questions and heightened awareness in the community, and they served as a visible reminder that the school expected a climate of inclusion and respect for all students in the school.

The many opportunities these students had to interact resulted in rich learning experiences. Through field trips and other experiences in the community, they helped each other learn

and practice communication and social skills, formed friendships, and increased success in both the classroom and community.

Middle School Example

One state's new regulations stipulated that students in a modified class could only earn elective credit even if an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) identified a need for that structure. Faculty at Freedom Middle School wanted to create a more inclusive environment, meet the needs of all students, and provide credit to each student so they converted their Adaptive Physical Education course to a Unified Physical Education course. The students without IEPs assisted the students who normally would have taken Adaptive P.E. Students learned to be patient, take turns, have fun, learn sports and games and engage in physical fitness while exploring their own potential. Students without disabilities were asked to lead activities that were sensitive to all student needs, and each student earned credit for the course. Working with their teachers and principal, students began to seek other opportunities to make their school a more inclusive place to learn, both within and outside the classroom.

"Seeing them play basketball and track and cheer and just interact with them has opened our eyes to their talents and their true personalities that maybe they were too shy to show before and now we really know who they are and what they're good at and what they like to do instead of just knowing their name or their face."

--Student



High School Example

Big Mound High School implemented two unified opportunities that helped build a more collaborative culture. Students with and without intellectual disabilities worked together to produce the play, "It's Our School, Too!", which was performed for the entire high school, all elementary schools in the district and the community.

One student, whose behaviors had made it difficult for him to participate in the general education class for any period of time, was part of the cast. During the performance, he knew his lines and when to go on and off the stage, and he supported his classmates in their performances. In reflecting on the play, one student said, "This isn't like any other drama production because we have all been so supportive of each other no matter what."

The second transformative opportunity was the first Unified Decathlon, which was so popular students argued over who would get to be partners with the athletes. One volunteer commented, "This was a great event to see students working together for a common goal and everyone performing to their potential."



"There's certain ways you're supposed to act in school, and you're supposed to fit in with a group, but you don't have to do that here, you just do the normal thing, do the natural thing, and do the thing that's better off for you and everyone else. A different side of people is a great thing to see sometimes."

--Project UNIFY Club Member

Priority Actions

To establish unifying programming in your school, consider the following actions.

Select one priority action to focus on this year.

- Include Unified Sports as an essential component of the health and physical education curriculum in all schools.
- Communicate the benefits of unified programming to staff and families through established school/district communications.
- Ensure school activities include students with diverse abilities and specific structures for mutual support.

Resources

It's Our School, Too!

http://media.specialolympics.org/soi/files/resources/Project_Unify/Its_Our_School_Too%20Script.pdf

Movies That Move

http://media.specialolympics.org/soi/files/resources/Schools_Youth/2011-Leaders-Guide.pdf

Play Unified, Live Unified

http://www.specialolympics.org/unified_sports.aspx

Get Into It[®]

<https://getintoit.specialolympics.org/>

Unified Sports[®]

http://www.specialolympics.org/Sections/Sports-and-Games/Unified_Sports.aspx

Unifying Programming Stages of Implementation

Novice	Emerging	Accomplished	Highly Inclusive
<p>School and community programs provide for a limited range of student ability needs to be adequately met.</p> <p>Traditional school sports and clubs rarely involve students with intellectual disability.</p> <p>The continuum of opportunities for students to learn in an inclusive setting is limited to coursework at their ability level.</p>	<p>A broad range of parallel activities are offered that collectively honor and develop the abilities of all students.</p> <p>The district provides equitable support for inclusive student activities such as Unified Sports and unified clubs, demonstrating equal value for these activities as traditional sports and clubs.</p>	<p>Access and opportunities for all students to participate together in both classroom and non-academic activities are provided regularly.</p> <p>There is an expectation for the entire school community to continuously seek opportunities to become a more inclusive learning environment.</p> <p>Traditional school sports and clubs consistently work toward becoming more inclusive and welcoming for all students</p>	<p>School activities and groups intentionally encompass a broad range of learners and diverse student population.</p> <p>School and community programs are offered and supported to equitably develop each student's potential through sports and academic, civic, social and service activities that engage both students with and without disabilities.</p> <p>School staff consistently works to ensure the effectiveness of the inclusive learning environment both inside and outside the classroom.</p> <p>School leaders can articulate and provide examples of programs that build inclusiveness and eliminate boundaries between students in their school and/or district.</p>

School/Community Collaborations

Special Olympics Project UNIFY® recognizes the importance of being part of an overall Special Olympics school-community relationship, focusing on changing how schools function, engaging students of all abilities, and developing a perception of Special Olympics as a partner in this effort, not just a program to join. Therefore, Project UNIFY focuses on working with the education community to ensure the school's climate is safe, nurturing and inclusive.

Research confirms that a safe school environment in which students have positive social relationships and are respected, are engaged in their work, feel competent, and are not “bullied” is critical for student success.

The policies that govern schools today focus on academic competencies and, thus, leave little time or room for sports and other programs that are not academic or content oriented. At the same time, the climates in most schools are not inclusive, accepting or focused on human dignity. That is why Special Olympics Project UNIFY focuses on engaging with schools as full partners to support the development of positive school climates of acceptance and diversity. The engagement of families and the community is essential for the development of socially inclusive schools.

What Does it Look Like?

Special Olympics and schools or school districts work together to develop the most appropriate and supportive strategies for promoting youth leadership and inclusion in the schools and community. Business partners support youth and school activities while opening doors for community services to benefit students.

“An environment where students have positive social relationships is critical for student success.”

Attributes of School/Community Collaborations

Attributes of school/community collaborations include:

- *School personnel work with community-based organizations such as Special Olympics to create and sustain collaborations and meaningful relationships that provide students with opportunities to contribute to content, design and implementation of projects and interactions.*
- *Students are given opportunities to develop relationships and promote their credibility with organizations representing the full breadth of the community, including businesses, youth development groups and clubs, before and after school programs, faith-based groups and civic and service groups.*
- *Students are given opportunities to collaborate with diverse community populations, reflecting ethnic, cultural, socio-economic and ability differences.*
- *Students are engaged in the evaluation of the effectiveness and impact of school-community collaborations on individuals, organizations and communities.*
- *School-community collaborations reflect a widespread belief that everyone is essential to the success of the community.*

Elementary School Example

Recognizing the value of a diversity of experiences and relationships for each child, Ms. Zhiang worked with her elementary school students to change the school climate. Through Unified Sports and Special Olympics Get Into It curriculum, students with and without disabilities came together and formed friendships.

Those friendships began through the introduction of the Unified Bowling team, bowling together once a month, and competing at the Special Olympics State Unified Bowling Tournament. The school staff worked with the local bowling center, and they donated staff time and use of lanes for students to learn how to bowl. Families were involved as students practiced and demonstrated their skills.

Because of this involvement, the students started to interact more with each other during the school day. These relationships were enhanced by the integration of Get Into It in the general education classroom, which helped students get a better understanding of the difficulties some of their peers face on a daily basis, helping the whole school community be more accepting and inclusive.

"It has completely changed the overall school climate and we have seen such a positive change in our athletes and more interaction among all students."

--Teacher Liaison



Middle School Example

Students at Southern Middle School worked together to perform Project UNIFY's play, "It's Our School, Too!," for the school body and community. The play was designed to raise awareness about the importance of inclusion in the school and community. Some of the most positive outcomes came through the students working together. One athlete buddy was too nervous to speak on stage. His peer buddy changed her schedule so she could attend rehearsals with him. The crew made cue cards to prompt the student with his lines, and his peer buddy read them as they performed together.

The play helped raise awareness about inclusion in the school and community. Students contacted local businesses that donated ice cream for the cast party, lights and sound systems, which were run by volunteers. The programs were created by a parent volunteer and reproduced by the school's copy center. Janitorial staff donated their services to clean the auditorium after the play. It was a true collaborative effort.

High School Example

A group of students in Mr. Bingham's advanced placement class began talking one day about how they did not have the opportunity to engage with students with intellectual disabilities in their classes. In reflecting about this, they realized that their rigorous course load restricted the opportunities they had to interact with a diverse group of their peers. As part of a service-learning project, students decided to work with an organization in their community to open an afterschool center where students of diverse ethnic, cultural, socio-economic and ability differences could gather.

This school-community collaboration nurtured friendships between students who might otherwise never have gotten to know each other and reinforced a positive community opinion of students.

Priority Actions

To increase opportunities for the school and students to develop quality collaborative partnerships with community organizations, consider the following actions.

Select one priority action to focus on this year.

- Engage community groups in the creation of inclusive schools and communities, making it possible for students to participate in leadership that addresses social problems.
- Provide meaningful opportunities for students and their families to be involved in activities that enhance the school community (e.g., service projects, Unified Sports programs, R-word campaigns for community).
- Initiate mutually beneficial school-community collaborations that provide opportunities for students of diverse abilities to engage with members of the broader community.
- Create individual graduation plans to reflect experience-based, career-oriented learning experiences including, but not limited to, internships, apprenticeships, mentoring, co-op education and service-learning.



Resources

Ideas for Engaging Families <http://inclusiveschools.org/>

It's Our School, Too!

http://media.specialolympics.org/soi/files/resources/Project_Unify/Its_Our_School_Too%20Script.pdf

K-12 Service-Learning Project Planning Toolkit

RMC Research, 2009

http://www.servicelearning.org/filemanager/download/8542_K-12_SL_Toolkit_UPDATED.pdf

Special Olympics Young Athletes Activity Guide

<http://media.specialolympics.org/soi/files/resources/Young-Athletes/Young-Athletes-Activity-Guide-2007.pdf>

School/Family/Community Collaborations Stages of Implementation

Novice	Emerging	Accomplished	Highly Inclusive
<p>The school generally works in isolation from the community, though community partners sometimes support specific projects.</p> <p>School policy inhibits or prevents students from leaving school grounds to participate in community activities.</p> <p>The school is occasionally asked to assist with events or projects in the community.</p>	<p>Students and staff seek opportunities to engage community entities in school activities.</p> <p>Students are given opportunities to interact with diverse entities within the community, reflecting ethnic, cultural, socio-economic, age and ability differences.</p>	<p>Students and staff are trained in collaborative skills and are expected to build meaningful diverse partnerships with the community.</p> <p>Communication and ongoing interaction with community partners is central to the school.</p> <p>Students work with partners to develop common goals and implement shared projects.</p> <p>The community accepts and encourages inclusive practices in the schools and wider community.</p>	<p>The school and community create and work toward a shared vision that supports and sustains an inclusive school climate.</p> <p>Students and staff at the school maintain mutually beneficial relationships with community entities that represent a broad cross-section of the community.</p> <p>Participants in school-community collaborations regularly reflect on their shared goals, progress and effectiveness of their collaborative process.</p>

Element 5/Operational Process #1

Communication

It may not be intuitive to all that communications must be sent in the way in which the message is most likely to be received, heard and understood. In order to ensure Special Olympics and Project UNIFY are relevant to an education community and to youth means an understanding of the ways in which these key communities communicate among themselves.

If we do not understand the communication methods of our youth, including those with special needs and different learning styles, we will never meet the objectives outlined in all the other elements. Communicating with all constituencies using modalities in which they most naturally and frequently communicate is key. This communication could take place on the web, through application software (app), by playing games, on Facebook and Twitter and by utilizing social media. It means communicating through the publications and vehicles most utilized by educators and administrators. It means making a conscious effort to include all.

What Does it Look Like?

Facebook, Twitter, SchoolTube and other social networking opportunities are employed and maximized; school address systems and group text messages are used to engage youth; and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is used in communications, lessons and activities to make information accessible to visual learners. For example, new technologies, games and interactive activities are critical components of Special Olympics Get Into It service-learning lessons and teaching/learning online resources.

"It's making our school more inclusive ... we're making a step in the right direction."

--Teacher Liaison



Attributes of Effective Communication

Attributes of schools that engage in effective communication include the following:

- *Mechanisms and systems are in place to articulate and demonstrate the characteristics of inclusive schools and the unique responsibilities of youth, teachers, administrators and community members.*
- *Internal (school) and external (public) audiences are regularly informed about programs that advance inclusive schools, including stories that highlight student development, achievement and success.*
- *When the word "student" is used, it always refers to every student in the school, regardless of ability level, special needs, services or academic placement.*
- *School communications are delivered in a variety of formats appropriate and accessible to each student and adult, both in medium and message, and including social media where appropriate.*
- *Students share information on inclusive schools and their impact, using appropriate social networking strategies.*
- *The school community intentionally shares and celebrates the skills, practices and accomplishments of all students and adults.*
- *The district and school encourage open communication and transparent processes.*
- *Lessons, class projects and school activities are conducted in ways that reach all types of learners by using music, videos, arts, interactive activities or team-based approach.*

Elementary School Example

New Directions Elementary School staff worked to raise awareness of the importance of creating an inclusive school by participating in Inclusive Schools Week. The New Directions "Respect for Human Differences" committee facilitated a series of activities designed to actively engage students, staff and parents in making their school more inclusive.

- Library/Media specialists compiled a bibliography of inclusive books to be shared as read-alouds by parents, teachers and guest readers.
- Teachers used the book, *A Bad Case of Stripes: It's OK to Be Different*, to prompt discussions in their classrooms.
- Students completed the statement, "I feel included when...", which were written on paper strips and hung around the school for all to see so that everyone was more deliberate in providing those inclusive opportunities.
- The Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) focused on creating an inclusive school by bringing in speakers and showing clips from *Including Samuel*.

Middle School Example

The staff in Youngstown School District thought visibility was key to promoting social justice. In every school office and classroom, the R-word Pledge was displayed on laminated posters, sending the message that staff supported students of all abilities and would not allow them to be ridiculed. After saying the R-word pledge in a student-run assembly at Youngstown Middle School, many faculty members and students were so moved they asked for posters of the pledge. These posters became a school fixture.

Cafeteria staff wore their bright orange, Project UNIFY Rally shirts on Wednesdays throughout the school year to show support for every student. Students showed support for other youth by being Fans in the Stands, using social media to get students to participate as spectators and cheer teams at events. As students watched their message spread, they learned valuable lessons about how to raise awareness by using effective

communication strategies through visual media and school-wide events.

High School Example

After watching a clip from *The Ringer*, in which individuals with intellectual disabilities shared how they are so often plagued by low expectations, a group of high school students began a discussion about how this movie played itself out in their school.

In small groups, students discussed questions such as: "Why do people label others and expect that they can't do something?" and "Why is it important to set your own standards and live up to them?" Together, they decided that a change needed to be made in their school to demonstrate the abilities and contributions of *all* students.

The students worked with their guidance department and were able to make significant changes in how and where students with intellectual disabilities were included in their school. They were able to change the homeroom structure so that those with intellectual disabilities would be welcomed into typical homeroom classes like the other students so they could hear morning announcements and begin to build relationships with other students in the school. They also fought for seniors with intellectual disabilities to be able to take advantage of the career placement opportunities that the guidance counselors organized so that, like their non-disabled peers, they could explore their own skills and begin considering employment opportunities.



"I think [students] gain knowledge that everyone is important, everyone is different, and that's good. Hearts have been changed by this."

--Teacher Liaison

Priority Actions

To promote effective communication and the use of inclusive language, consider the following actions.

Select one priority action to focus on this year.

- Ensure school staff communicates with family members and community on aspects of inclusive schools and opportunities for youth and family engagement.
- Provide professional development on effective strategies for special and general education students to frequently interact and communicate, establishing strong social bonds that benefit all.
- Provide all students opportunities to communicate with peers and others within the school community.
- Ensure that communications are sent in the most appropriate format to engage the audience.

Resources

Movies That Move

http://media.specialolympics.org/soi/files/resources/Schools_Youth/2011-Leaders-Guide.pdf

Project UNIFY Social Media Toolkit

http://media.specialolympics.org/soi/files/resources/Schools_Youth/Social-Media-Resource-Toolkit.pdf

R-word: Spread the Word to End the Word

<http://www.r-word.org/>

Get Into It[®]

<https://getintoit.specialolympics.org/>



Communication Stages of Implementation

Novice	Emerging	Accomplished	Highly Inclusive
<p>Inclusion and inclusive language is rarely used in formal and informal school communications.</p> <p>School communications leaders/staff have not been trained to use inclusive language.</p> <p>School communications prioritize certain students' academic, athletic and service attributions and contributions.</p>	<p>School staff members are trained in the use of inclusive language and generally use these skills in their daily communications.</p> <p>School regularly offers assemblies and events which focus on inclusion and how to talk about it with peers, parents and community members.</p>	<p>School communications highlight students' diverse gifts, talents and contributions rather than a narrow definition of student success, demonstrating the value placed on all students' unique individual abilities.</p> <p>Students are taught to use inclusive language in their school and personal verbal, written and social networking communication.</p> <p>There are clear expectations that all students and staff use inclusive language in their daily communications, which is supported by modeling and reinforcement.</p>	<p>Mechanisms and systems are in place to regularly inform stakeholders of positive impacts of inclusiveness.</p> <p>The word/concept of "student" is intentionally used to refer to <i>all</i> students.</p> <p>School communications use inclusive language and formats.</p> <p>Signs in the school reflect inclusion and the school's commitment to ensuring every student is valued.</p> <p>The word, inclusion, is used on the school's web site and in presentations given by school leaders, staff and students.</p>

Professional Development

Maximizing current leaders and developing the next generation of leaders is at the core of Project UNIFY. Leadership is not only an opportunity for adults to take responsibility for themselves and others, but also for youth to be engaged in activities that increase their leadership knowledge and skills.

Project UNIFY believes in the importance of providing formal and informal training and technical assistance to current and future leaders, and above all, to creating and sustaining corresponding learning communities so that there are consistent, on-going opportunities to increase leadership knowledge and skills.

“Project UNIFY has begun to have a transformational effect on the [school] community of students, parents, teachers and administrators.”

--Administrator



Project UNIFY offers leadership and professional development for youth, teachers, school administrators, national policymakers and education leaders as well as Project UNIFY staff. One of the unique features of Project UNIFY leadership and professional development is the focus on an individual's continuous improvement.

What Does it Look Like?

Professional development, training and skill building for students, teachers, staff and school administrators is at the core of the school's programs and is evident in a variety of formats. It is acknowledged that leader development and ongoing professional development are essential components of an inclusive school.

Attributes of Quality Professional Development

Attributes of quality professional development include the following:

- *Regular and frequent opportunities are provided for special and general education teachers to come together as a professional learning community to increase knowledge and skills supporting inclusiveness.*
- *Ongoing, school-embedded opportunities are provided for all school personnel to increase their competencies to support inclusive schools.*
- *Multiple professional development strategies (e.g., simulations, small group conversation, guest speakers) are employed with students, teachers, administrators and community members to ensure diverse learning opportunities for all.*
- *Students are engaged as co-facilitators of professional development, sharing strategies they find most effective to create and sustain inclusive schools.*
- *Informational programs about inclusive schools, inclusive teaching strategies and the range of student abilities are provided for students and family members.*
- *Students are given the skills necessary to function as leaders and members of a civil society.*

Elementary School Example

Teaching teams at the Juniper Center used a variety of strategies to increase awareness of effective instructional strategies for creating an inclusive classroom. As part of Inclusive Schools Week, teachers were asked to share their successful strategies with their colleagues during “Lunch Time Learning of Inclusive Practices.” These included:

- Answering the question “What is Inclusion?” and sharing a personal example of how you have seen inclusive schools have an impact on a teacher or student.
- Presenting an inclusive practice used in their classroom.

As teachers learned new strategies and tried them out in their classrooms, they discovered the rich learning opportunities they were able to provide for their students through making their classroom more inclusive.

Middle School Example

As part of the state’s focus on improving education for all young adolescents, teams of teachers and teacher leaders were brought together for a symposium to share their experiences in using inclusive practices throughout their classrooms and school activities. The symposium was structured to provide opportunities for teachers to inform others’ practice, reflect on lessons learned, and create a network of support.

Over three days, teachers learned from each other by providing presentations on specific areas of expertise. Multiple opportunities for reflection and interaction were included throughout the symposium to allow teachers to incorporate new knowledge and skills into their instructional repertoire. Ongoing opportunities to continue the learning were provided through an online network.

The state sponsored a Youth Summit at which middle and high school students, both with and without disabilities, learned how they

could work to make their schools more inclusive. They learned (and shared) a variety of strategies for engaging youth, and school/district teams developed plans for the upcoming school year.

High School Example

The faculty at Ahrens High School began using the *Gallup/Clifton Strengths Finder* and *Strengths Explorer* tools to help students and faculty identify their strengths. This was a transformative process for the staff and students, and the faculty began to view students from the perspective of what they can contribute to the community.

Students were given the opportunity to participate in breakout sessions that addressed their top strengths. During the breakout sessions they learned how to use these strengths to develop leadership roles in their school and community.

Staff members were also working with their own strengths, and the superintendent asked that the staff print their top five strengths on their name badges. Discussion of personal strengths became a part of staff meetings, and they shared good news and praised others for their work.

“Our kids are very supportive of inclusion initiatives, and I feel that the sky is the limit with Project UNIFY at our school.”

--Administrator



Priority Actions

To improve professional development and collaboration in your school, consider the following actions.

Select one priority action to focus on this year.

- Design and provide comprehensive professional development opportunities for educators that build an understanding of the importance of social inclusion and the skills necessary for success.
- Implement quality teaching and learning strategies that effectively engage all students in leadership roles in the classroom, school and community (e.g., project-based learning, cooperative learning, service-learning, community-based learning).

Resources

High Quality Instruction That Transforms: A Guide to Implementing Quality Academic Service-Learning

Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2010.
<http://www.servicelearning.org/library/resource/8993>

Get Into It®

<https://getintoit.specialolympics.org/>



Professional Development Stages of Implementation

Novice	Emerging	Accomplished	Highly Inclusive
<p>Basic knowledge about addressing the needs of a diverse student population is provided to all staff.</p> <p>Professional development is targeted at distinctly different audiences rather than shared learning experiences.</p>	<p>Informational programs are provided to parents, students and staff to increase understanding of diverse student abilities and inclusive teaching strategies.</p> <p>Special and general education teachers occasionally collaborate as professional learners within a professional learning community.</p>	<p>Specific district professional development opportunities frequently incorporate discussions and skill building in supporting inclusiveness.</p> <p>School and community events are offered to students and the broader community to increase knowledge and skills that support inclusive schools.</p> <p>Collaborations between special and general education teachers are encouraged to build competencies in providing an inclusive learning environment.</p>	<p>Students, staff and families are provided opportunities to increase their competencies to create and sustain an inclusive school environment.</p> <p>High-quality, ongoing professional development is supported through the use of regular and frequent professional learning communities.</p> <p>Students with and without disabilities are engaged as co-facilitators of professional development to share strategies they find most effective in creating and sustaining an inclusive school environment.</p>

Continuous Improvement

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. As youth co-create projects focused on advocating for youth as *change agents*, they begin to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to be effective champions of social justice.

While adults are much more comfortable creating opportunities for youth in schools and communities, Project UNIFY establishes a set of engagement strategies that reverses this trend, encouraging students to lead and sustain projects. This requires a change in adults as well as students. Adults need to trust students to establish high-quality learning opportunities and facilitate their learning, not control it.



"[Project UNIFY] has truly made an impact and assisted in changing the climate at our school."

--Teacher Liaison

Another initiative is the focus on reflection and continuous improvement. This requires a commitment to not just collect data or wait to the end to evaluate outcomes, but analyzing data continuously for improvement. This is a shift from many current school practices, where data is used to provide sanctions or rewards. Reflection requires participants to review activities for meaning. "What did we do?" "What did we learn?" "What consequences does it have for our work?"

Quality reflection leads to a focus on continuous improvement, ensuring that data leads to improvement and analysis leads to specific strategies to enhance anticipated outcomes and impacts.

What Does it Look Like?

There is review and evaluation of the efficacy of all activities at all levels; learning is incorporated in real time; there is flexibility to adapt and reinforce successes and eliminate stumbling blocks; ideas of young people are incorporated at the fast pace with which they are comfortable; and change, adaptation and evolution of programming are ongoing.

Attributes of Continuous Improvement

Attributes of schools that engage in continuous improvement include:

- *School and district leaders make necessary changes to adapt school climates to changing needs of student populations.*
- *Teachers engage in reflective practices and continuously monitor instruction and classroom management to identify opportunities for their classroom to become more inclusive.*
- *The district provides opportunities for staff to work collectively across schools to share, assess and improve inclusive practices.*
- *Opportunities exist for bringing together students, families, school and community leaders and community members to reflect on the success of the school.*
- *Instructional strategies and school programs are consistently reviewed and revised to ensure inclusiveness and effectiveness.*
- *Policies ensure accessibility for all students through instructional effectiveness, school programs and school climate.*
- *A comprehensive system of evaluation and ongoing improvement addresses school effectiveness, including issues of inclusion.*

Elementary School Example

When Mountainville School District consolidated their elementary schools, staff discovered that their student population would be far more diverse than it had been in previous years. One of the significant changes was the addition of two special education classrooms.

As the staff and principal explored the implications of these changes, they remained committed to creating a school climate that nurtured the success of all students. During the summer before the changes were to take place, the teachers came together to plan school-wide activities focused on increasing awareness of disabilities, building inclusive peer relationships, and developing a sense of belonging for all students. Grade level teams worked with special education staff to modify classroom activities to provide successful learning experiences for all students and developed class schedules that enabled special education and general education teachers to co-teach in order to meet a broader range of student needs.

Throughout the school year, school staff reflected on their progress, discussed challenges, and identified strategies for improvement. They sought input from parents, students and the community through surveys, school events and classroom conversations which engaged students in creating and sustaining change.

Middle School Example

As part of a class project, students at Southern Middle School conducted a survey of students and staff to identify the degree to which the school was considered to be inclusive. Through the survey, they determined that most students felt they were accepting of others, and yet, over 68% of the students agreed with the statement, "I often feel excluded from activities."

To address these concerns, students worked with their principal to offer a variety of activities designed to encourage their peers to become more inclusive. For example, one

month was designated as "Sit With Someone New" month. Student groups were given points for inviting someone outside their immediate peer group to sit at their table. At the end of each week, points were tallied, and an "Inclusive Table" award was given to the tables that were welcoming toward others.

At the end of the year, students conducted their survey again and found a significant increase in the number of students reporting they felt accepted, respected and supported at school.

High School Example

The physical education elective, *Child's Play*, at Liberty High School was designed to teach high school students how to lead games and other physical education activities at a local elementary school. This class improved through a cooperative exchange of ideas, which led to a more collaborative work environment involving the high school students and students in the self-contained special education class.

Students in the elective experienced a work environment which allowed them to understand and appreciate the differences of fellow students, as well as adjust lesson plans to meet various needs. Use of the Get Into It curriculum helped students understand people with disabilities have the same wants, desires and dreams as those without disabilities.

After learning how much students at the elementary school were affected by the use of negative stereotypes and derogatory words, the high school students realized that students at the high school would be similarly impacted. They expanded their work to their own school where they worked to spread awareness school-wide.

Both students and faculty decided to continue the class and efforts to make their school more inclusive. They made some gains in community awareness, but they realized that could improve. The faculty is committed to making the efforts more youth driven and creative as the work continues.

Priority Actions

To engage in a process of continuous improvement and promote social inclusion, consider the following activities.

Select one priority action to focus on this year.

- Implement a school assessment process to identify the level of inclusiveness, establishing a baseline; use the results as part of the school improvement process; and document progress.
- Provide professional development to create and implement reflection activities to assist with the identification of personal strengths and collective attributes.
- Identify and share effective measures of inclusive schools and disaggregate data, interpret the results, and improve inclusive practices.

Resources

Connecting Thinking and Action: Ideas for Service-Learning Reflection

RMC Research, 2004,
<http://www.servicelearning.org/filemanager/download/132/Reflection%20Guide%20Internet1.pdf>

Get Into It[®]

<https://getintoit.specialolympics.org/>

Sustaining Progress Toward Inclusive Schools

<http://inclusiveschools.org>

The Principal's Responsibilities in Supporting Quality Instruction

<http://inclusiveschools.org>



Continuous Improvement Stages of Implementation

Novice	Emerging	Accomplished	Highly Inclusive
<p>Plans for developing and supporting an inclusive school climate are implemented without collecting data to guide decisions.</p> <p>Programs and activities to create a more inclusive school climate and increase the effectiveness of the learning environment for all students are adopted without a shared vision and collective agenda.</p>	<p>School and district leaders allocate time and resources to develop effective learning environments that provide an inclusive school climate and meet the needs of all students.</p> <p>Efforts to improve school climate and increase effectiveness of instructional practices are consistently reviewed and revised to provide inclusiveness and effectiveness of the learning environment.</p>	<p>All constituents (including students, staff, parents and community) are given regular opportunities to reflect and share input on the effectiveness of the learning environment in meeting the needs of all students.</p> <p>Policies are in place and actively used to ensure social inclusion for all students through instructional effectiveness, school programs and school climate.</p>	<p>Data is collected on the inclusiveness of the school climate and effectiveness of the learning environment from multiple sources across all stakeholders in the school and community throughout the year.</p> <p>This evidence guides decisions and plans for continuous improvement.</p> <p>Evidence is used to improve experiences and progress toward goals to ensure inclusiveness and effectiveness of the learning environment.</p> <p>Evidence of progress is communicated with the broader community to deepen understanding of an inclusive school climate and an effective learning environment which meets the needs of all students.</p>

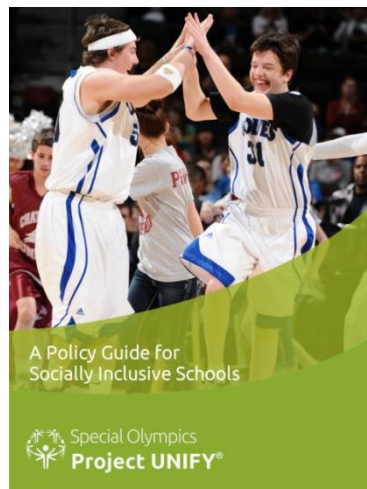
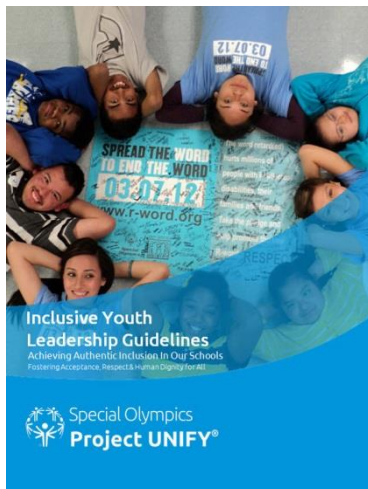
Summary

“A Framework for Socially Inclusive Schools” provides leadership to educators, students, communities and advocates to promote successful socially inclusive practices. The seven elements of the framework were designed to create and sustain socially inclusive schools and communities.

Students should be encouraged and supported to be agents of change, have opportunities to be leaders, and participate in collaborative school activities. To achieve this, school leaders and educators must foster a socially inclusive school climate that emphasizes acceptance, respect and human dignity for all students. A socially inclusive school is a place where no student is excluded because of the degree or type of disability or the services required to meet his/her needs.

Social inclusion should not be an option for schools, but rather a commitment and core value to ensure equitable access and success for all students and adults.

Related Documents and Resources



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A Framework for Socially Inclusive Schools

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