



Resource Guide for Administering Special Olympics Unified Sports® at the High School Interscholastic Level



Special Olympics
**Unified Champion
Schools®**





Intended use

This resource is designed for anyone responsible for administering Interscholastic Special Olympics Unified Sports® at the high school level. This audience primarily includes Special Olympics State Program staff, state athletic/activities association staff, high school league/section administrators, school athletic directors and Unified Sports coaches.

Unified Sports, at the interscholastic level, brings together students with and without intellectual disabilities (ID) to train and compete on the same team while representing their school.

This resource was collaboratively developed by the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) and Special Olympics North America (SONA) and is supported by the National Interscholastic Athletic Administrators Association (NIAAA). It provides guidelines for administering Unified Sports when it is treated as an officially sanctioned high school sport, where Unified Sports teams represent their school, compete with other high school teams and function as any other interscholastic program.

An online training course titled “Administering Interscholastic Unified Sports” has been developed to accompany this resource and is available at no-cost at nfhslearn.com.

The goals of this resource include the following:

- **Provide strategies and tools to assist those administering Interscholastic Unified Sports at the state and school level.**
- **Share best practices that minimize risk and promote meaningful participation opportunities for all students.**
- **Increase the quality and consistency of Interscholastic Unified Sports throughout the United States.**

NOTE: See addendum for list of terms and additional supporting materials.



Guidelines for Interscholastic Special Olympics Unified Sports

Interscholastic Unified Sports is a school athletics/activities program that is co-supported by the State Special Olympics Program and the State High School Athletic/Activities Association. The following guidelines have been established as benchmarks of a quality interscholastic Unified Sports program:

- **Teams are administered and supported in a similar fashion as other interscholastic sports teams.**
- **Teams are comprised of approximately equal number of students with and without intellectual disabilities.**
- **All teammates and coaches are accountable to following the official Unified Sports rules, applicable state association rules and regulations, and training standards prior to competition.**
- **Coaches follow the Unified Sports parameters of team composition to help minimize risk and ensure meaningful participation.**
- **In addition to participation, programs provide genuine competition experiences with place of finish results.**
- **All teammates are meaningfully involved in training and competitions and have the opportunity to contribute.**
- **Teams compete against other Interscholastic Unified Sports school teams using a consistent set of official Unified Sports rules.**
- **Interscholastic league-play and competitions are officiated by sport-specific certified officials.**



Interpretation of the Guidelines

The following section provides certain points of emphasis and a more detailed interpretation of the guidelines.

- **Teams are administered and supported in a similar fashion as other interscholastic sports teams.**

Unified Sports teams at the high school interscholastic level should be supported by the school/district athletic department. The following are some examples of how Unified Sports teams can be supported in a similar fashion as other school sports teams (not limited to):

- Coach hiring and training
- Scheduling of practice facilities
- Providing proper sport-specific uniforms
- Developing competition/league schedules and assigning officials
- Organizing transportation
- Recognition of the Unified Sports team and individual teammates
- Promoting fan attendance at competitions

- **Teams are comprised of approximately equal number of students with and without intellectual disabilities.**

Special Olympics Unified Sports® combines approximately equal numbers of Special Olympics athletes (individuals with intellectual disabilities) and partners (individuals without intellectual disabilities) as teammates on sport teams for training and competition.

Students with other types of disabilities can be eligible to participate as a Unified Sports partner, however teams should not be comprised solely of individuals with disabilities.

For further guidance on identifying Special Olympics athletes, see Article 2 of the Special Olympics General Rules at <https://bit.ly/2SeKth8>.

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- **All teammates and coaches are accountable to following the official Unified Sports rules, applicable state association rules and regulations, and training standards prior to competition.**

Interscholastic Unified Sports team shall have one or more qualified adult coach that has completed all training and coaching requirements as determined by their state association and/or their state Special Olympics Program.

Interscholastic Unified Sports coaches shall complete the online Coaching Unified Sports Course on the NFHS Learning Center nfhslearn.com.

No teammate shall be entered in a competition until they have acquired the skills, knowledge of sports rules, and level of physical conditioning necessary to compete meaningfully and safely.

- **Coaches follow the Unified Sports parameters of team composition to help minimize risk and ensure meaningful participation.**

Interscholastic Unified Sports coaches are responsible for the health and safety of all players, which is their primary and top priority. This responsibility should guide coaches in the selection of appropriate athletes and partners to participate on any Unified Sports team.

Examples of Unified Team-type Sports:*

basketball, flag football, soccer, tennis doubles, volleyball

Examples of Unified Individual-type Sports:*

track & field, bocce, bowling, swimming

*Note: sports are offered at the discretion of each State Association and State Special Olympics Program

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- **In addition to participation, programs provide genuine competition experiences with place of finish results.**

Interscholastic Unified Sports competition shall be conducted using the standards outlined in this resource guide with emphasis on use of official sports rules, certified officials and coaches, appropriate uniforms, standard court/field sizes and place of finish results.

Interscholastic Unified Sports teams shall be provided opportunities to experience genuine competition. An important component of the school sports experience for student-athletes is getting the opportunity to represent their school and competing against others. Competition is where student-athletes learn the many life lessons that come from winning and losing- it is also where teammate bonds become deeper. The following are some examples of competition that could be offered:

- League play
- Conference/section tournaments
- Invitational competition events
- State Championships

- **All teammates are meaningfully involved in training and competitions and have the opportunity to contribute.**

No rule or rule modification shall be implemented that would completely restrict Unified partners from competing, including but not limited to scoring points during competition.

Following the Unified Sports team composition parameters will greatly increase the levels of meaningful involvement of all teammates. The experience for both the athletes and partners should be considered during training and competition. All teammates on the field of play should meaningfully contribute to the natural flow of competition, especially in terms of scoring points.

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- **Teams compete against other Interscholastic Unified Sports school teams using a consistent set of official Unified Sports rules.**

NFHS and State Association sports rules shall be used in combination with Special Olympics Sports Rules for interscholastic play (<https://bit.ly/38Voxy7>).

All interscholastic play shall follow a consistent set of Unified Sports rules as adopted by the State Association and State Special Olympics Program. The same rules should be used during all league-play games as well as higher levels of competition.

Reasonable accommodations to individual participants with unique and extenuating circumstances may be necessary to achieve meaningful involvement, however the accommodations should not fundamentally alter the sport, heighten risk to the athlete/others or place opponents at a disadvantage.

- **Interscholastic league-play and competitions are officiated by sport-specific certified officials.**

All Interscholastic Special Olympics Unified Sports competitions shall be officiated by officials that have been qualified by the state association or respective National Governing Body.



Credit: Cathy Poston (PA)



Addendum Materials

- Terms
- Article 1 References
- Best Practices for Achieving Meaningful Involvement
- Best Practices for Maximizing Participation
- Background & Purpose of the Resource
- Acknowledgements
- References & Resources

Terms

- **SONA**
Special Olympics North America
- **NFHS**
National Federation of State High School Associations
- **NIAAA**
National Interscholastic Athletic Administrators Association
- **Special Olympics Program**
State Special Olympics Program accredited by Special Olympics International
- **State Association**
State High School Athletic/Activities Association that is a member of the NFHS
- **Article 1 Special Olympics Sports Rules (<https://bit.ly/2tZYs2g>)**
The Official Special Olympics Sports Rules (“Sports Rules”) provide standards for Special Olympics training and competition. Article I provides general principles established by the Special Olympics Official General Rules (“General Rules”) that are not found in the sport-specific rules. In case of any conflict between the Sports Rules and the General Rules, the General Rules shall govern.

Article 1 References

Below are extracts from Article 1 of the Special Olympics Sports Rules that are points of emphasis and references for those administering interscholastic Unified Sports programs. The numerical digits in front of each extract is the rule number from Article 1.

Health & Safety:

14.2.1.1 Coaches are responsible for the health and safety of all players, which is their primary and top priority. This responsibility should guide coaches in the selection of appropriate athletes and partners to participate on any Unified Sports team.

Team Composition for Unified Sports:

14.2.2.2 Members of a Unified Sports team should be able to demonstrate fundamental skills and strategies of the sport.

14.2.2.3 While there are specific rules governing the number of Unified Sports athletes and partners required during competition, coaches should also maintain an approximately equal number of athletes and partners on the overall roster (as close to half the total number as possible). This will decrease the possibility of a game forfeiture due to failure to meet the required line-up ratio and will enhance the Unified Sports experience in both training and competition.

Meaningful Involvement:

14.2.3.3 "Meaningful Involvement" is an effort to optimize participation by all team members (athletes and partners) based on the principle that every player should contribute to the success of the team. The composition of any team must include players with necessary sport-specific skills. Teams should not include players who dominate play, exclude other teammates from contributing to the success of the team, or present a health and safety risk on the field of play. By permitting any player to dominate play, other players' roles and opportunities are greatly limited. This violates the Special Olympics Unified Sports rules and philosophy and will be addressed according to the standards set forth by each sport's governing rules.

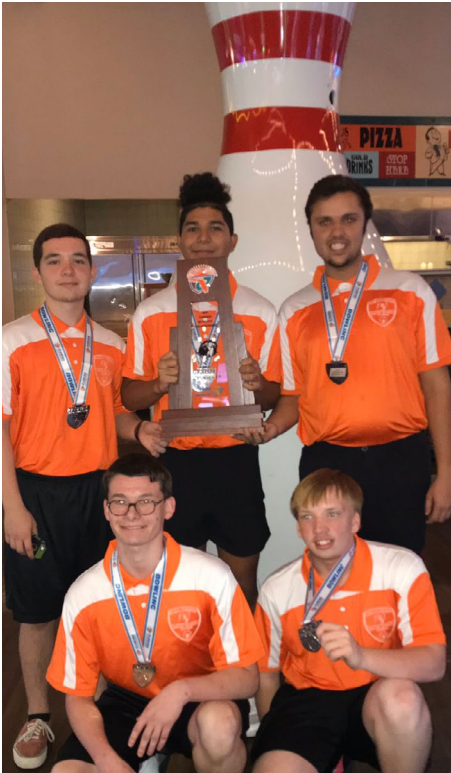
Sports Rules:

2.1 All Special Olympics training and competitions shall be conducted according to their respective Sport-Specific Rules.

Participants with Physical Disabilities:

2.4 Athletes with Physical Disabilities

2.4.1 When creating opportunities for Special Olympics athletes with physical disabilities to participate in sports training and competition, Special Olympics Programs should be guided by the following principles: 1) each athlete should enjoy a dignified and meaningful competition experience; 2) the integrity of the sport must be preserved; and 3) the health and safety of all athletes, coaches and officials must not be compromised.



Best Practices for Achieving Meaningful Involvement

Below are some best practices for administering Unified Sports programs in high schools. These are approaches to help achieve meaningful involvement of all students (not to be confused with the Interscholastic Unified Sports Guidelines).

- **Always strive for similar ability levels:**

- Ability matching of teammates is a universal challenge of Unified Sports, especially in school environments where there is a broad range of students. Abilities will never be the same, however a closer range of abilities on a team will produce a more authentic sports experience.

- **Offer individual-type sport options:**

- Individual-type Unified Sports do not require ability matching and allow for a much wider range of abilities to participate without modifying rules or style of play. Examples of these sports include: track & field, bocce, bowling and swimming.

- **Avoid using existing student-athletes as Unified partners within the same sport:**

- Varsity/JV players will typically not be a good match as a participant on a Unified Sports team (within the same sport) as their ability level will likely be far superior and create an imbalance with the other teammates.
- Varsity/JV players may however be a better fit to participate in a different Unified sport that is held during a different athletics season.
- Additionally, many state associations and schools have policies that restrict student-athletes from participating in more than one sport/team during a given athletics season.
- Including students not currently involved with athletics also creates more student participation opportunities for the school.

Best Practices for Maximizing Participation

Below are some best practices for administering Unified Sports programs in high schools. These are approaches to help maximize participation and provide opportunities for all students (not to be confused with the Interscholastic Unified Sports Guidelines).

CHALLENGE: Students who want to participate, but do not yet have the skill level or knowledge of rules to have a meaningful/safe experience on an Interscholastic Unified Sports team.

SOLUTIONS:

- Offer students a chance to join practices with the Interscholastic Unified Sports team to work on skill development.
- Offer additional inclusive programs, which allow for students of any ability to participate. These may include: Intramural Unified Sports, Unified Fitness or Unified PE.

CHALLENGE: Students who want to participate, but their skill/athletic ability is far superior to other members of the Interscholastic Unified Sports team.

SOLUTIONS:

- Offer students a leadership role where their talents can be utilized to benefit the team, such as a coach's assistant.
- Offer additional inclusive programs, which allow for students of any ability to participate.

CHALLENGE: More students want to participate on the Interscholastic Unified Sports team than can be accommodated on the roster.

SOLUTIONS:

- Explore offering multiple Unified Sports teams (i.e. Varsity Unified Sports and JV Unified Sports).
- Offer additional inclusive programs, which allow more students to participate.
- Offer other avenues for student involvement such as a Unified Club.
- Explore participation opportunities that might be available through the Special Olympics local community program.

Background & Purpose of the Resource

A committee was developed by Special Olympics North America to better understand the challenges and inconsistencies with interscholastic Unified Sports and identify guidelines and best practices to help address them. The committee started by conducting interviews with 21 Special Olympics State Programs to learn more about their interscholastic partnership, including the collection of challenges and best practices. A common trend of feedback was a desire for more direction and guidance from the national level, as opposed to leaving it to local interpretation. With that in mind the, the purpose of this resource is to provide all stakeholders with a more universal vision for what a quality Unified Sports program looks like at the high school interscholastic level.



Credit: Ken Smith (NY)

Acknowledgements

Appreciation goes to the following individuals who served as contributors or reviewers for this resource:

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Athletic Conference*

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*Unified Sports Student-athlete,
Massachusetts*

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the Special Olympics United States
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References & Resources

- **Article 1 of Special Olympics Sports Rules**
<https://bit.ly/31eRJqQ>
- **Special Olympics Sports-specific Rules**
<https://bit.ly/2S9lrjd>
- **NFHS Sports-specific Rules**
<https://bit.ly/3aVLvXP>
- **NFHS Coaching Unified Sports Course**
<https://bit.ly/2u8CQRb>
- **NFHS State Associations**
<https://bit.ly/2OlyOfg>
- **Unified Fitness Resources**
<https://bit.ly/3b5ymvs>
- **Unified Champion Schools & Unified PE Playbooks**
<https://bit.ly/4rQleS5>
- **Uniform Guidelines for Unified Sports Teams**
<https://bit.ly/4a7fNI9>



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The contents of this "Resource Guide for Administering Special Olympics Unified Sports at the High School Interscholastic Level" were developed under generous funding from the US Department of Education, #H380W170001 and #H380W180001. However, those contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the US Department of Education, and one should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.



U.S. Office of Special
Education Programs