

2009–2011 Reach Report



Special Olympics Project UNIFY – a powerful catalyst for change in schools

Special Olympics Project UNIFY® is a collaboration with school communities for engaging young people with and without intellectual disabilities as leaders promoting acceptance and inclusion in their schools, utilizing the sports and education initiatives of Special Olympics.

Youth engagement is a key component of the community building pillar of the 2010-2015 Special Olympics Strategic Plan: “Provide consistent opportunities for young people with and without intellectual disabilities to engage in Unified Sports, Young Athletes, cheer teams, volunteerism, and leadership development activities worldwide.”

Why?

We know that youth have very little social inclusion with students with intellectual disabilities :

- Only 38% of youth have a schoolmate with intellectual disabilities
- Only 10% of youth have a classmate with intellectual disabilities
- Only 10% of youth across the country report having a friend with intellectual disabilities .

Siperstein, G. N., Parker, R.C., Norins Bardon, J., & Widaman, K. F. (2007). A National Study of Youth Attitudes toward the Inclusion of Students with Intellectual Disabilities. *Exceptional Children*, 73, 435-455.

And we know that there is very little academic inclusion in schools:

- Only 31% of students with intellectual disabilities take *academic** classes with their general education peers.
- Only 45% of these students’ teachers consider their placement to be “very appropriate.”
- According to their teachers, only 54% of these students are keeping up with their class.

U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Special Education Research, National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2), Wave 1 student’s school program survey, 2002.

Special Olympics Project UNIFY® takes us:

- From include to UNIFY®
- From special education students to *all* students
- From adult-led to student-led
- From sport opportunities to sports as a catalyst for ***social inclusion and attitude change***

Programmatic Components

- **Unified Sports®** teams
- **Traditional Special Olympics Games** and **sports** events (volunteerism, **Fans in the Stands**)
- **Young Athletes™** – early intervention communication, social and motor activities
- **Partners Clubs** – inclusive clubs for sports training and organizing SO-related activities
- **Youth Summits** – inclusive youth activation meetings designed and led by youth
- **R-Word Assemblies** and **Rallies for Respect (Spread the Word to End the Word)**
- **“Get Into It®”** – K12 standards-aligned, integrated, interactive service-learning curriculum

"It almost brings tears to your eyes to know normal-needs kids no longer see special-needs kids as outcasts."

- Carol Goforth, Cleveland County, NC Special Olympics Coordinator

- **ALPs** – Athlete Leadership/Inclusive Youth Leadership

Since its inception in September 2008, Project UNIFY has had wide reach:

- 45 U.S. State Programs have implemented
- 667,000 youth exposed
- 85,000 youth engaged
- 1,700 schools have participated at some level

During the 2009-2010 school year U.S. State Programs report:

- 772 new schools became involved and a total of 1,562 schools offered Project UNIFY activities
- Project UNIFY activities were introduced to 230,371 young people
- 23,932 new and returning Special Olympics athletes and 15,789 Unified partners participated
- 30,623 2-7 year-olds participated in the early childhood motor activities Young Athletes® Program

Special Olympics Project UNIFY Highlights to Date

Special Olympics Project UNIFY® Program

School Projects

- Project UNIFY currently is in practice in 42 state Programs and involves at least 1,500 schools, where student-led projects demonstrate the value of all young people in creating communities of understanding and acceptance.
- up to 200,000 young people are participating directly in projects, including 8,900 new Special Olympics athletes just this past year.
- \$5.2M in Project UNIFY funds have been distributed on a competitive basis to 45 U.S. Programs conducting Project UNIFY projects over the past 2 years.

- In the 2010-11 school year another \$5.5M will be distributed to Programs for school based projects meeting strict criteria, \$2.4M of that directed to 8 focus states where we will do in depth evaluation and research in 50 schools.
- All state Programs now report that they are working with general education teachers as well as special education teachers in their school programming. All but three states report full cooperation by teachers.

Youth and Education Leadership

- Youth Activation Committee, 20 youth leaders, with and without intellectual disabilities, contribute to, guide and advise Project UNIFY and related activities, including creating and facilitation a National Youth Activation Summit at the 2010 SO USA National Games.
- 10 young people, with and without intellectual disabilities, joined the Project UNIFY staff team for summer internships in 2010 providing them opportunities in leadership, investigation and professional development.
- The Project UNIFY National Education Leaders Network made up of national leaders in education reform advise and guide development of national strategy for promoting the work of Project UNIFY.
- Partnerships with education organizations such as the NEA Foundation, The State Education Agency K-12 Service-Learning Network (SEANet), the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), National School Boards Association (NSBA), The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), the National Dropout Prevention Center (NDPC), the IDEA Partnership and many others.

- Last year there were 13 state Youth Activation Committees and 9 state Education Leaders Networks; this year an emphasis on these leadership formations is promoting the development of even more.

National Education Leadership Roundtable

- During the 2010 National Games in Lincoln, Nebraska, 55 members of the national education community aged 13 to 65, and including Alexa Posny, Dep. Secretary, Office of Special Education Programs of the US. Department of Education, came together to discuss and coalesce around a commitment to a broader vision of inclusion.
- The group committed to a plan of action in which adults support and promote all young people -- with and without intellectual disabilities -- to become effective and visible leaders in their schools, communities and society by providing opportunities to use their voices and talents in meaningful and responsible ways.

National Youth Activation Summit 2010

- 140 young people from 35 states in the US convened for a week during the 2010 Special Olympics USA National Games, for a series of inclusive youth leadership, education and

service learning experiences, completely developed and implemented by Project UNIFY Youth leaders.

- The youth designed, youth-led and facilitated sessions provided opportunities for youth participants to acquire and enhance their knowledge and skills in inclusive sports practices, advocacy and social justice through sports, and service-learning needed to activate youth around the country.

2010 National Education Conference

- Co-hosted with the University of Nebraska-Omaha, and co-facilitated and led by educators and youth with and without intellectual disabilities, and with participation by 110 general and special educators from schools across the U.S.
- A major focus of the Education Conference was inclusive practices in the classroom, and how to use inclusive opportunities to enhance school climate.
- Overlap and interaction with the Youth Summit in order to promote a laboratory effect. Cross-over topics included social justice and advocacy, social networking, how adults and young people can work together effectively and youth engagement.

"The general education and special education students have learned so much about each other ... I see the students hanging out in the halls together now and having lunch with each other. It's a win-win situation for everyone."

- Linda Davenport-Kennedy, Teacher at North High School and Project UNIFY Coordinator

"What I saw enabled in youth at the Youth Activation Summit can only be described as a sort of social genius. ... these young people (at least in this setting) were already unfettered by the social and cultural norms and expectations of the teenage years, of disability, and of so much more. All of the anxieties, the self consciousness, the uncertainty of youth were somehow set aside and overpowered by the collective and by the commonality of difference. These were teenagers who were willingly and passionately deconstructing through their relationships and actions the prohibitive and exclusionary norms of their schools, communities, and our broader culture that label and exclude those with intellectual disabilities."

- Anderson Williams, Director of Consulting, Oasis Center, Nashville, Tennessee

K-12 "Get Into It®" Curriculum

- Completed revisions of the Special Olympics "Get Into It" Curriculum, a fully endorsed K-12, standards aligned, integrated and service-learning curriculum promoting acceptance and understanding of differences, especially those with intellectual disabilities .
- The curriculum is being launched nationally this fall with an interactive website that engages teachers and students in online activities and learning communities.
- Initial review by a small group of teachers in 3 states revealed that after experiencing "Get Into it":
- Students developed an appreciation for the contributions of Special Olympics and revealed a likelihood to get involved with SO
- Most of their involved students had made an effort to reduce incidents of intolerance towards students with intellectual disabilities
- Most of their students changed what they thought of persons with intellectual disabilities
- Nearly all of the teachers rated it "excellent" or "good"

- Every teacher who completed the survey planned to use the curriculum in their classes
- Full evaluation to be completed this spring, 2011.

Young Athletes®

- Young Athletes introduced in schools as the earliest opportunity for students to engage in inclusive physical education and motor activities.
- Early study results show:
- 75% of teachers reported improvements in Motor Development *
- (strength and endurance, balance, eye-hand coordination, specific motor skill)
- 71% of teachers reported improvements in Cognitive Development* (understanding of directional words, awareness of body parts, memory of routines)
- 65% of teachers reported improvements in Social Development* (self confidence, peer relationships)
- 69% of teachers reported improvements in Self Help Skills*

- (following 2-3 step directions, turn-taking, eye contact, attention span)
- 62% of teachers reported improvements in Communication Development* (increased interactions with peers, increased use of alternative communication)

Spread the Word to End the Word®

- Youth generated, youth led campaign, activation resulting from Global Youth Rally and Global Youth Activation Summit has been conducted for three years running, reaching over 200,000 pledge signatures on the **www.r-word.org** pledge site.
- Nearly 50,000 members of R-Word “Spread the Word” Facebook community.
- Nation-wide campaign at high schools, universities, and throughout communities for one day asking every young person to help lead an effort to eliminate demeaning uses of the r-word (retard).
- The campaign has become one of the most galvanizing youth led activities in Special Olympics, and has spread beyond the US to India, China, and countries in Europe, the Middle East and Africa.
- In India, 9 million signatures have been collected in schools across the country of young people pledging not to use hurtful language to describe people with intellectual disabilities
- More than 1,500 schools and colleges have conducted events on or surrounding 3.31.09, 3.03.10 and 3.02.11

Evidence-based Results

- Evaluation of the first two years of Project UNIFY involved evaluation surveys completed for 900 schools the first year and 683 in the second year, with more in depth evaluation on participants of 19 schools plus surveys from 4,500 students.
- Findings from the first year were primarily formative and include:

- Of participating schools, 27% have principals involved. In 76% of schools the key administrator of Project UNIFY is a teacher. In 77% two or more teachers or other adults in the school are involved in implementation, and 36% involve four or more, a whole school approach!
- There is wide-ranging appeal in terms of the size of the schools involved, diversity in minority composition and the social and economic status of the community.
- Schools are involving students with and without intellectual disabilities in the planning and implementation of Project UNIFY, as well as other school-based groups.
- The platform for building a program in schools is most often Special Olympics Unified Sports®.
- The largest number of students is involved in awareness building and the R-Word Campaign, showing it is possible to engage students with and without intellectual disabilities together in ongoing efforts to promote inclusion and acceptance of diversity.
- Major findings from the second year build on the results from year one and include:
 - While Programs still use their connections with special education teachers as an entry point into schools, Programs are now reaching out to different groups of people, including administrators and general education teachers.
 - Almost all states implemented a sports initiative (Unified Sports, Traditional SO Sports, or Young Athletes) and a youth leadership or educational initiative (Youth Rally or Summit, Partners Clubs, SOGII, or ALPs) in at least one school.
 - There is a developing collaboration between State SO Programs and schools. Almost half of the liaisons (48%) reported that they worked with someone from the State SO Program to develop Project UNIFY initiatives.

"(The conference) was awesome, phenomenal, and awe inspiring. I am ready to return to school, inspired, motivated and ready to activate my plan of actions. There was so much that I liked about the conferences until I don't know where to begin ...I have been a teacher for almost twenty years and this was, by far, one of the greatest conferences I have attended. The information presented was not just for special education teachers but for general educators as well."

~Janice S. Robinson, teacher, Beaufort County School District, South Carolina

- While the majority of the Project UNIFY liaisons were special education teachers (65%), more general education teachers are becoming involved-- 17% of liaisons were general education teachers.
- The majority of the liaisons (45%) felt that most or all of the teachers in their school were aware of Project UNIFY. This is most true in schools where information was disseminated to school staff through email and other staff announcements.
- Youth leadership and voice is becoming a habit: 42% of the schools involved both youth with and without disabilities in planning and implementing Project UNIFY events.
- Greater involvement with Project UNIFY is associated with more positive student attitudes towards peers with intellectual disabilities.
- In schools engaging in Project UNIFY, Students' perceptions of school climate were generally positive, and showed students who are more involved in Project UNIFY are more likely to have positive perceptions of school climate, and/or students who have positive perceptions of school climate are more likely to become involved in Project UNIFY.

In addition to ongoing programming, during the 2010-2011 school year Project UNIFY will emphasize:

- Focus on advancing our understanding of the most meaningful and sustainable ways Project UNIFY is implemented, deepening relationships with other organizations, providing professional development and sharing our progress with education stakeholders.
- Identify strategies to increase involvement by school principals, administrators, and general education teachers; promote more youth-driven activities and opportunities for youth with and without intellectual disabilities to co-create; introduce project designs that involve a combination of sports and awareness activities; provide for more family involvement and advocacy; and make a deeper connection to local SO events.
- Continue to align with compelling and critical education trends such as character education, service-learning, student engagement, and the social-emotional development of youth.
- Distribute nearly 70% of the total funds received for this project this year will be provided to state SO Programs in the form of criteria-based funding.
- Require Unified Sports and Get Into It as project components.

Work with 8 “High Activation” state Programs chosen to serve as the incubators for Project UNIFY to observe more intimately how the Project UNIFY components are combined and implemented and the levels to which they create unified school environments. (Arizona, Colorado, Maryland, Missouri, Oregon, North Carolina, South Carolina, Texas).

- Develop a research agenda for Project UNIFY that guides our own research activities, as well as partnerships and collaborations with existing research efforts in areas that can support, inform, and contribute to the fields of inclusive education, school climate and social emotional development.
- Prepare for participation in the Global Youth Activation Summit (GYAS) at the 2011 SO Summer Games in Greece; we will continue our investigation into global opportunities for youth engagement and activation pilots and Project UNIFY programming.
- Monitor projects conducted by select participants in the 2010 National Education Conference (NEC) who were provided funding to implement and enhance teaching strategies; create safe, accepting and tolerant school climates; and, sustain the professional learning community developed during the NEC.
- Create a student-designed on-line set of lessons, strategies and resources for teachers to educate, motivate and activate all students through sports, service-learning curricula and other engagement strategies.
- Join with national education leaders and policy makers in developing consensus among youth and educators on the major education, political, and social issues of student engagement, school climate, and equitable education for all students with a call-to-action in the form of proposed policies and national action steps that further the cause of youth voice, youth leadership, inclusion, and social justice as education principles.
- Implement an aggressive marketing plan to bring the “Get Into It” curriculum to educators across the country, in a way that will create sustained learning and teaching communities of practice for both teachers and students.
- Market to national, state and local stakeholder groups, organizations and associations the Project UNIFY support resources and tools developed to date, and will conduct on-site professional development in each of the High Activation project states.