

The Importance of School Climate



Overview

Special Olympics Project UNIFY® is committed to working with Special Olympics Programs to develop school communities where all young people are agents of change by utilizing sports and the programs and initiatives of Special Olympics.

In order for Project UNIFY® to be effectively integrated and sustained in a school there needs to be an environment that routinely provides experiences and opportunities for teachers and students to practice respect, dignity and advocacy for all students, including those with intellectual disabilities.

Particularly, a school climate that nurtures the characteristics of Project UNIFY® needs to ensure that engaging students with and without intellectual disabilities in Special Olympics sports and competition is a core value and practice; rather

than a marginal set of opportunities for some students to experience and enjoy.

What is School Climate?

Let's begin by thinking about climate in ways we are most familiar and that is, in terms of the weather. When it is warm outside, we are usually comfortable and feel good; when the weather turns extremely hot or extremely cold it is less comfortable and requires more effort to feel good; and when the climate is cloudy some individuals feel relief, from the sun, and other feel challenged in anticipation of stormy weather.

In other words, weather-related climate impacts how we feel and our willingness to be engaged.

Similarly, school climate impacts how students feel, their willingness to get involved, their excitement to contribute and their sense of self and others. School



climate matters and our commitment to broadening the vision of inclusion and engagement requires school climates to reflect the characteristics of respect, equity, dignity, honesty, justice and safety.

If a school climate does not reflect these characteristics it is challenging to integrate and sustain consistent and equitable opportunities for students with and without intellectual disabilities to engage with one another and develop lifelong dispositions and actions necessary to be productive youth and adults.

Project UNIFY® defines school climate as *the quality and character of school life that fosters inclusion, acceptance, respect and human dignity for all students.*

This type of school climate requires the engagement of all education stakeholders, not just students and not teachers alone; but from all administrators, school staff, parents and community partners. Thus every stakeholder is given the opportunity and expected to contribute to creating and sustaining an effective quality school climate.

These characteristics accurately describe the

According to the National School Climate Council (2009) an effective quality school climate includes:

- Norms, values, and expectations that support people feeling socially, emotionally and physically safe;
- Members of the school community who are engaged and respected;
- Students, families and educators that work together to develop, and contribute to a shared school vision; and
- Educators who model and nurture an attitude that emphasizes the benefits and satisfaction that can be gained from learning.

foundations of a school environment where Project UNIFY® can thrive. Therefore a school community that values and manifests appropriate and effective engagement leading to inclusion, acceptance, respect and human dignity for all students commits to creating and sustaining policies and practices such as:

- Students with intellectual disabilities are engaged and supported in leadership positions such as student council and school wide or focused advisory groups;
- The school provides quality opportunities for all students (with and without intellectual disabilities) to work together to benefit others within the school structure (e.g., service-learning);
- Students are routinely invited to provide insights into how the school can improve its capacity to effectively serve and engage all students;
- Teachers encourage all students to take risks in their classes to express their opinions about school and social issues;
- Special Olympics programs, sports and competition are easily structured into the school day and school activities as positive elements of a quality educational experience;
- The school highlights through internal and external communications the contributions their students make to the school and community and takes pride in these accomplishments;
- The school welcomes and engages community partners (individuals, businesses, associations and institutions) in mutually beneficial collaborations;
- The schools analyze data from all stakeholders focusing on continually improving their ability to engage all students;

- The school creates specific professional development for teachers, administrators and staff to increase their knowledge and skills to effectively motivate and educate all students to achieve and contribute to their school and community;
- Teachers, administrators and staff respect each student and assist them to achieve, contribute and succeed in school and in life.

These characteristics together establish a set of norms, systems of support, engagement strategies, collaborations and nurturing attitudes that create and sustain a school climate consistent with Project UNIFY® values. The greater the similarities of the quality and character of school life with Project UNIFY® values determines the likelihood of the program’s impact and sustainability.

How Does Project UNIFY® Focus on School Climate?

All Project UNIFY® strategies focus on creating and sustaining a positive school climate that values and manifests appropriate and effective engagement leading to inclusion, acceptance, respect and human dignity. These strategies include students engaged in Unified Sports®; youth leadership; school-community collaborations; service-learning opportunities; improving classroom practice; communications; professional development; and creating and sustaining relationships between students with and without intellectual disabilities.

School climate that supports and sustains Project UNIFY® characteristics to truly activate youth as leaders and change agents is most effectively achieved by engaging youth with and without intellectual disabilities through sports and games.

Consider the following example from Maudlin Middle School (Simpsonville, SC).

The school declared the first week of February the “Be a fan of Special Olympics” week. The students were invited to participate in activities, such as a school-wide Be a fan of Special Olympics (SO) poster competition. Young people were invited to be the judges for the contest; they chose a winner for each of the three grade-levels and they were recognized through an announcement at school and at the school basketball game. Every morning, interesting facts and statistics along with SO PSA’s were shared during their morning announcements and TV show. All of this lead up to the school’s basketball game on Thursday night. The Special Olympics basketball team athletes were invited to sit on the bench with the middle school’s team during the entire game (the final game of the season), in actual Maudlin Middle School uniforms. The team was invited out to the court during halftime to show off some “moves” for the packed crowd. All of the poster contest entries were hung around the gym, adding to the already fantastic atmosphere. The entire school truly embraced and embodied the spirit of Special Olympics during that special week, and one assumes for months to come.



According to Siperstein, et al. 2004, "Providing students with and without intellectual disabilities the opportunity to interact in meaningful ways through activities that highlight their similarities rather than accentuate differences have been shown to be valuable in promoting positive attitudes." These positive attitudes by all school members create environments where "students with and without intellectual disabilities can learn about each other, overcome barriers to acceptance and become leaders for change" (Special Olympics Project UNIFY® Evaluation Report 2008 – 2009).

Further evidence of creating and sustaining an effective, supportive and respectful school climate is found in the following story.

A school in Nashville, Tennessee has embraced a school climate of inclusion that includes classrooms spaces for all students to work together, share together and learn together. Instead of a strategy that engages special education students into general education classes and all-school activities, the school created opportunities in special education settings to engage all students.

In one setting, students bake and sell cookies to the student body and staff; baking together, selling together and creating friendships. In the Care Bear setting, students with and without intellectual disabilities work together on school assignments, creating friendships and creating a climate of inclusion and mutual respect. The Care Bear setting is also a formal elective for students, thus aligning opportunities with formal course credit.

These opportunities are long-term and permeate the schools climate and in fact we find that younger siblings of previous students engage with these two settings.

What Are The Implications of School Climate Research on Project UNIFY®?

Over the past two decades, there has been a growing appreciation that school climate fosters – or undermines – children’s development, learning and achievement. Research confirms what teachers and parents have claimed for decades: a safe school environment, in which students have positive social relationships and are respected, are engaged in their work, and feel competent, is critical for student success.

A growing number of reports, studies and legislation emphasize the importance of positive school climate in reducing achievement inequities, enhancing healthy development, and promoting the skills, knowledge and dispositions that provide the foundation for school – and lifelong – success.

Research also indicates that positive school climate is a critical dimension of effective risk prevention, health promotion efforts, and learning.¹ Recent research reviews have shown that effective risk prevention and health promotion efforts are correlated with safe, caring, participatory and responsive school climates.² Finally, recent studies show that the length of school attendance has the highest correlation with health even after socio-economic status and other variables are taken out. School climate can be argued to be a factor in dropout rates and therefore related to lifelong health.³

One of the fundamentally important dimensions of school climate is relational, i.e., how “connected” people feel to one another in school. In fact, the extent to which students feel attached to at least one caring and responsible adult at school is an area of increased attention among school climate researchers. School connectedness is a powerful predictor of adolescent health and academic outcomes,⁴ violence prevention⁵ and as a protective factor in risky sexual, violence, and drug use behaviors.⁶

School climate also promotes student learning and powerfully effects student motivation to learn.⁷ For example, activities like service-learning and student councils value student engagement and enhance the learning environment by providing students with opportunities to participate in the learning process and construct their own knowledge of social and government systems.⁸

Moreover, when such activities are presented in a supportive, collaborative environment, they encourage students to build upon one another's ideas on projects.⁹ Together, the experience realistically represents the social situation that they may find themselves part of in the greater civil society.¹⁰ In an overlapping manner, positive school climate promotes cooperative learning, group cohesion, respect and mutual trust.¹¹ Positive school climate, by definition, is characterized by strong collaborative learning communities. Research shows that this improves teacher practice as well as student learning through dialogue and collaboration around engaging classroom practice.¹²

Project UNIFY® benefits from these research findings and at the same time manifests the positive impacts of a school climate that consistently provides experiences and opportunities for students to practice respect, dignity and advocacy for all students, including those with intellectual disabilities.

In fact by engaging students with and without intellectual disabilities through sports and games, Special Olympics Project UNIFY® offers researchers and school climate advocates with an effective strategy that can be considered, adopted and/or adapted in most schools.

¹ Najaka, et. Al., 2002; Rand Corporation, 2004; Wang, et. al., 1993
² Cohen, 2001; Berkowitz & Bier, 2005; Catalano, et. al. 2002; Greenberg, et. al. 2003
³ Kolata, 2007.
⁴ McNeely, et. al., 2002; Shochet, Dadds, Ham & Montague, 2006; Whitlock, 2006.
⁵ Karcher, 2002a, 2002b.
⁶ Catalano, et. al, 2004; Kirby, 2001.
⁷ Comer, 1984; Eccles, et. al., 1993; Goodenow, & Crady, 1997.
⁸ Torney-Purta, 2002; Homana, Barber, & Torney-Purta, 2006; Youniss et al., 2002.
⁹ Wentzel & Watkins, 2002.
¹⁰ Bandura, 2001, Torney-Purta et al., 2001.
¹¹ Ghaith, 2003, Kerr, 2004; Finnan, et. al, 2003.
¹² Talbert, 2002.



What Are The Implications for a Project UNIFY® School?

An effective quality school climate that supports and manifests Project UNIFY® characteristics increases the opportunity during the school day that encourages meaningful interactions among all students. These interactions lead to quality relationships among students with and without intellectual disabilities while at the same time demonstrating to school and community members the contributions all students can make to their school and community.

At the national level, as school climate becomes a more focused element of education reform, Special Olympics Project UNIFY®, can provide leadership to the world outside of and parallel to Special Olympics to demonstrate effective strategies to create the most effective, respectful and safe environment for all students to achieve success in school and life.

At the state level, Special Olympics state leaders and advocates can articulate to state policymakers

and education leaders the unique advantage Project UNIFY® offers to effectively engage students with and without intellectual disabilities through sports and games to enhance the school's climate and increase student achievement and success.

At the local level, Project UNIFY® leaders and staff can demonstrate to district and school leaders that Project UNIFY® not only engages students with and without intellectual disabilities in sports and competition but that such engagement will only be sustained through a school climate that nurtures development, learning and achievement. Further such a school climate engages all stakeholders in more authentic ways providing many benefits to the district and school.

These actions will advance quality school climates that not only support Project UNIFY® characteristics but also provide teaching, learning, serving and interactive environments for students, teachers, administrators, parents and community members to feel connected, safe and successful.



Example of School and Classroom Climate Measures

The following is an example of the type of questions that measure school and classroom climate.

The following statements describe situations found in many schools. Rate how true these statements are in your school.

Use the following scale: 1=false 2=often false 3= sometimes true, sometimes false 4= often true 5= true

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| 1. Students generally treat each other with respect and fairness. | 14. There is no damage done to school property. |
| 2. Students help each other even if they are not friends. | 15. There is no use of drugs or alcohol by students in this school. |
| 3. Students who belong to different groups are friendly. | 16. There is almost no verbal abuse or putting people down. |
| 4. Students trust each other. | 17. There is almost no cheating. |
| 5. Students and teachers trust each other. | 18. Students get a good education and learn a lot. |
| 6. Teachers generally treat students with respect and fairness. | 19. Students learn to become more responsible and caring for other people. |
| 7. Teachers are really interested in students and want to help. | 20. Students learn how to speak up and express opinions. |
| 8. Students and teachers openly discuss problems. | 21. Students have a chance to think about real issues. |
| 9. Teachers give students a say in decisions about school rules. | 22. Students learn how to listen to other people's ideas better. |
| 10. Some rules are made by votes by both students and teachers. | 23. Students learn how to take other people's points of view. |
| 11. There is no fighting in this school. | 24. Students learn to stop and think about things before speaking/acting. |
| 12. There is no cutting classes or skipping school. | 25. Students get a chance for a better future. |
| 13. There no stealing in this school. | |

Higgins-D'Alessandro, A. & Sath, D. (1997). The dimensions and measurement of school culture: Understanding school culture as the basis for school reform. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 27, pp. 553-569.