

# Project UNIFY Evaluation Supplement



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## Introduction to Year 4 Data

Over the past four years, the Center for Social Development and Education at UMass Boston has partnered with Special Olympics International to evaluate Project UNIFY and explore the various levels of impact. From the participating State Special Olympics Programs to the administrators, liaisons, and students, there are many stakeholders involved in making Project UNIFY work in the school setting. During Year 4, information was collected from these various sources, providing many different perspectives from which to learn.

This document, "Something You May Learn," is a supplement to the larger report that is submitted to the Department of Education. While all the data contained in this document also appears in the larger report, this supplement highlights some of the data as it relates to specific stakeholders. One of the goals for creating a supplemental report is to provide relevant information to State Programs and schools that will help them think about their

programming. Continuous improvement and learning will hopefully help State Programs and schools move toward sustainable practices.

The first section of this supplement focuses on Project UNIFY from the perspective of school liaisons. While the data contained represents liaisons nationally, there are consistent trends that emerge that will be of interest and of use to State Programs as they work to support their own Project UNIFY liaisons. To learn more about your state in particular, refer to your State Feedback Form, which you received in September.

The second section of this supplement focuses on Project UNIFY from the perspective of school administrators. This section can benefit school liaisons by providing ideas for improving communication and increasing the engagement of their administrators. This information can also be useful for State Programs as they consider how they enter into and maintain ongoing partnerships with schools.

The third and last section focuses on the perspectives of students most engaged with Project UNIFY. Their comments provide insight into how and why students get involved with Project UNIFY. This information will be useful for all those interested in the impact the Project UNIFY is having in schools.

Thank you for all your hard work! We hope you find this information useful in moving forward for Year 5!

**UMass Team**

# Project UNIFY: Something State Programs May Learn from School Liaisons

When examining school-based Project UNIFY programs, the Project UNIFY school liaison stands out as a central figure who can best provide a well-rounded perspective on both the school and the Project UNIFY programming. After all, it is the liaisons who work directly with students, witness interactions among participating students, coordinate activities, and who take on the extra work mainly because they believe in the program and what it is trying to achieve. For State Special Olympics (SO) Programs, the liaison is a valued resource. Liaisons communicate with State Programs about successes and challenges, share ideas for how other schools can implement activities, and provide feedback from the ground level that can influence state and national processes. In the spring of 2012, the Center for Social Development and Education at UMass Boston surveyed 1,073 Project UNIFY liaisons from 38 states to learn about Project UNIFY during the 2011-2012 school year. The survey contained a wide range of questions, including some that focused on the types of activities that took place at the school and others related to implementation of initiatives, support the liaisons received both from within the school and from their State Program, and training opportunities. The goal of this document is to provide State SO Programs with knowledge they can use in thinking about how to better support their liaisons and participating schools.

*"I would like to see additional staff involvement as well as more student involvement. The students that participated are my best avenue to get other students involved."*

## Who are the school liaisons?

The individuals who typically serve as Project UNIFY liaisons share several common characteristics. Most liaisons are female (80%), and many are special education teachers (54%). Most liaisons have had previous involvement with Special Olympics (78%); on average, these liaisons have been involved with Special Olympics for 9 and half years, demonstrating a commitment to and belief in programming for people with disabilities. However, while these characteristics paint a picture of the typical liaison, they need not limit schools and State Programs from seeking to expand the network of teachers and staff engaged in Project UNIFY.

## How does it all get done?

Momentum for Project UNIFY activities is different in every school, as it is dependent on factors such as how dedicated the liaison is, how much time the liaison can put into organizing activities and initiatives, how involved the students in the school are, and whether the school as a whole embraces Project UNIFY. Regardless of school differences, however, all liaisons need support in order to create a strong Project UNIFY program.

When liaisons were asked whether there were people at the school who helped with the planning and implementation of activities, the majority

*"More information overall would be helpful. I have not even heard of some of the Project UNIFY activities described in this survey. At our school I would really like to include more students with disabilities in different types of participation."*

responded that they did have help (68%). Support came from various individuals, including students, other teachers, and administrators, as well as Special Olympics staff and volunteers. An important goal for Project UNIFY schools is to create a strong base of student leadership so that activities and planning are student-driven. Though this can be challenging as students come and go over the years, just under a third of liaisons in Year 4 (28%) reported having Project UNIFY activities that were planned and implemented mainly by students. Typically, the R-Word Campaign was the most popular for students to plan and implement.

An interesting implementation strategy for Project UNIFY is arranging activities to take place in collaboration with other school activities or programs. In Year 4, less than a quarter of liaisons (20%) reported that activities often or always took place with other ongoing events in the school. Similarly, only 24% liaisons said that Project UNIFY values and lessons were often or always incorporated into the classroom by teachers. While this type of overlap or collaboration can be thought of as a strategy for sustainability and embedding Project UNIFY within the school, it can also make building a distinct awareness about Project UNIFY's specific goals more difficult. If schools do not utilize collaboration and embeddedness strategies for their Project UNIFY program, they are generally focusing on raising awareness and building the name of Project UNIFY to focus on sustainability.

## **How is Project UNIFY perceived in schools?**

As liaisons are typically the center point of Project UNIFY programming in the school, State SO Programs rely on these individuals to inform them of what is taking place in the school and what impact Project UNIFY may be making. On the topic of awareness of Project UNIFY in the schools, fewer than half of the liaisons (41%) reported that most or all of the student body knew about Project UNIFY, with very few (9%) reporting that all students in their school were aware. A similar number of liaisons (46%) reported that most or all of the school staff were aware of the Project UNIFY activities taking place at the school.

While school-wide awareness of Project UNIFY is preferable, it is useful to consider that many schools are still building their Project UNIFY programming. There is an expectation that familiarity with the program at the school level will grow as the program expands, ideally leading to an increased perception of value and support for Project UNIFY programming in the future. At present, almost all liaisons (96%) believe that Project UNIFY is valuable for the school as a whole. When liaisons were asked their perceptions on how valuable other groups in the school believed Project UNIFY to be, liaisons suggested that others might be slightly less likely to view Project UNIFY as valuable. Just over three-quarters of liaisons believed that their administration and other teachers viewed Project UNIFY as valuable (84% and 81%, respectively).

## How are SO State Programs working with schools?

The ways in which State Programs work with schools to implement Project UNIFY vary across states and even among schools. While some states have standardized processes for how schools work with SO and get involved with Project UNIFY, nationally there are no established trainings or protocols for engagement. Generally, half of the liaisons (46%) received training from their State Program on how to implement Project UNIFY programming at the outset of their participation. It is perhaps not surprising that a number of liaisons commented on the need for more information about Project UNIFY – for some, the survey they received as part of the evaluation (and its listing of the various Project UNIFY initiatives) was the first time they had heard about some of the potential activities. Providing more standardized information about all Project UNIFY has to offer in terms of the initiatives available should be an important goal for Project UNIFY going forward. While some SO State Programs may not be able to support schools with all of their initiatives, school liaisons need to be knowledgeable of potential options for Project UNIFY expansion.

In terms of ongoing professional development, approximately two-thirds of State Programs (68%) reported providing professional development opportunities during the course of the year to liaisons, either at the state, regional or school level. In those states that offered professional development, 60% of the liaisons reported being aware of these opportunities for on-going learning on how to implement Project UNIFY or make improvements to their programming. Two-thirds of these liaisons

(67%) were able to take advantage of these opportunities. The majority of those who did participate rated these trainings as helpful (93%). Going forward, providing ongoing training or information to liaisons, and assuring that all liaisons are aware of these professional development opportunities, may help ensure robust Project UNIFY programming across schools.

The relationship between SO State Programs and schools was also analyzed looking at the frequency of communication which varied widely across schools and states, but overall the majority of liaisons (69%) felt that the involvement of their State SO Program in programming was about as much as they wanted. One way that SO State Programs show their support to schools is by providing liaisons with Project UNIFY materials such as uniforms, t-shirts, and posters. Across all states, almost three-quarters of liaisons (72%) received some sort of materials from their State Program in Year 4. There was more variation across states in the provision of direct funding, with only a third of schools (32%) receiving a stipend for participation, and less than a quarter of liaisons (17%) receiving a stipend for facilitating Project UNIFY.

The availability of funds and resources clearly impacts programming, as schools that received direct support from their State Program in terms of materials, in kind services and support and/or direct funding were able to implement, on average, more Project UNIFY initiatives than those who did not receive this type of support. While it might be possible that those schools planning and implementing a greater number of Project UNIFY initiatives

*"Project UNIFY has had a positive effect on our school environment. The special education students are accepted and have made friends that respect them and welcome them into all activities in our school. Everyone wants to be a part of Project UNIFY."*

*"I am at the beginning stages of this program but feel confident in the steps our school will be implementing for the next school year."*

- Project UNIFY Liaison

seek out materials and financial support or in-kind services and support, it is also possible that some schools are unaware of the possibility for such support and, as a result, limit their Project UNIFY programming. Increased communication between State SO Programs and schools as to the role they can play in supporting Project UNIFY could foster more comprehensive programming in the schools.

### **What sort of impact is Project UNIFY having?**

Project UNIFY liaisons are well-situated to recognize the ways in which their schools and students benefit from Project UNIFY. Liaisons reported a number of ways in which Project UNIFY made a difference in their schools. According to liaisons, Project UNIFY made a difference in increasing the participation of students with ID in school activities (58%), raising awareness about students with ID (65%) in the school, and increasing the opportunities for students with and without ID to work together (64%). A similar number of liaisons believed that Project UNIFY made a difference in increasing the confidence of students with intellectual disabilities (65%) and providing them with more sports opportunities (55%). Finally, liaisons credit Project UNIFY with creating a more inclusive climate in the school (57%).

### **What are some of the challenges liaisons face?**

Overall, Project UNIFY is considered to be a worthwhile program, with almost all of the liaisons (84%) viewing the activities and events of the past year as successful. However, while the majority of liaisons believe the workload of facilitating Project UNIFY is about what they expected (59%), there were

challenges noted. The most frequent challenge was finding enough time for Project UNIFY activities (60%). Other challenges included transportation arrangements (37%) and having enough money for Project UNIFY activities (39%).

Notwithstanding the limited funding and increased time pressures facing schools, however, Project UNIFY liaisons are dedicated to the programming. In fact, most (70%) said that they are very likely to participate in Project UNIFY next year.

The dedication of liaisons is an important aspect to the success of Project UNIFY, which liaisons themselves recognize. Currently, half of Project UNIFY liaisons (50%) feel that Project UNIFY is not likely to continue at the school without their direct involvement, illustrating the need to build strategies for sustainability in individual schools into discussions among State Programs, administrators, and school staff.

*In the field of education, research suggests that administrative support is vital for providing qual-*

Clearly, Project UNIFY liaisons are key players in making programming successful in schools across the country. Targeting the liaison with professional development opportunities and improving communication strategies to focus on partnerships is an excellent strategy in thinking about school sustainability. Acknowledging their value and utilizing their first-hand knowledge can be an important next step in strengthening Project UNIFY moving into Year 5 and beyond.

# Project UNIFY: Something Schools May Learn from Administrators

ity school programming and promoting a positive school environment. Having the buy-in from an administrator greatly influences the likelihood that a school initiative will be sustainable for the years to come. The Project UNIFY evaluation team explored the role of administrative support in the success and sustainability of Project UNIFY in schools. Data was gathered during site visits conducted at nine schools around the country and through an online survey of administrators from a sample of 38 schools participating in Project UNIFY.

## Administrator Support

Within Project UNIFY, there are a number of areas in which administrators might get involved, ranging from making the decision to take part in Project UNIFY and developing a partnership with Special Olympics to being aware of and active in the planning of Project UNIFY activities in the school. Within these opportunities for involvement, Project UNIFY programs in different schools operate with varying levels of administrative support. In general, fewer than half (43%) of administrators reported that they were very involved in the initial decision to start Project UNIFY in the school. In addition, most administrators were not involved in, or generally aware of, the partnership with Special Olympics; over half of the administrators (63%) reported that no one from Special Olympics had reached out to them to discuss Project UNIFY programming.

Regardless of how involved they were in the decision to implement Project UNIFY in the schools, most administrators believed that Project UNIFY could benefit their schools. During conversations with administrators, a variety of reasons for wanting Project UNIFY in the school emerged, such as to create opportunities for student involvement, to raise awareness, and to foster acceptance and inclusion.

Once the program was up and running, a limited number of administrators considered themselves very involved in the planning of the Project UNIFY activities that took place at the school (15%). Instead, the majority of administrators (63%) responded that they were somewhat or a little bit involved. Conversations with liaisons confirmed this, as many liaisons kept their administrators informed about Project UNIFY activities, but most only involved their administrators directly when approval was needed for something (e.g. transportation, use of facilities). However, one administrator suggested that struggles for administrative support for programs like Project UNIFY can too often prevent them from even getting off the ground. This administrator believed that since administrators have the voice and the power to make a program successful within a school, they also have the responsibility to do so. Overall, this perspective was unique among the administrators who participated in the evaluation but provided an important perspective on how ownership of a program from an administrator can make a difference.

## Administrator Priorities & Goals

To better understand the schools participating in Project UNIFY, administrators were asked about their school's top priorities and how Project UNIFY aligned with school goals. In addition to increasing academic achievement, which 90% of administrators ranked as a high priority, administrators generally viewed promoting acceptance and interaction among students of different races, cultures and abilities (70%), and reducing bullying and teasing (78%), as high priorities in their school.

While these latter two school priorities align well with the goals of Project UNIFY, very few schools actually incorporated Project UNIFY into their school improvement plans (13%). On the whole, administrators were

unable to comment regarding whether the goals of Project UNIFY in their school were being met; one of the greatest challenges from an administrator's perspective was how Project UNIFY can serve in the school as a measurable, outcome-based program such that it could be incorporated into their improvement plan. Some ideas that administrators mentioned as possible measurable outcomes of Project UNIFY were: *inclusion and empathy of staff, awareness of disabilities, decreased incidence in verbal/physical bullying, parental awareness of Project UNIFY, behavior and social conscience, increased offering of initiatives based on student interest, and increased involvement of teachers*. Despite this lack of clarity, most administrators (66%) valued Project UNIFY and believed that it was a program that could be effective in their school both in the short and long term.

## Moving Forward

While many schools have strong Project UNIFY programs, they may not be as sustainable or school-wide without strong administrative involvement and knowledge of the program. It may be useful to have a conversation with administrators about their role and Project UNIFY goals. This could help administrators become advocates and serve as a voice for the program.

Several administrators noted that some teachers remain hesitant about social inclusion or feel protective of students with disabilities and the segregated classroom. Project UNIFY often challenges schools to rethink routine school practices for student interaction, and therefore school administrators need to play a role in supporting and educating their staff about social inclusion if changes are to occur. For instance, providing professional development around inclusionary practices could perhaps greatly benefit school staff. With more leadership, administrators can provide the school community with an opportunity to discuss concerns and goals, and create a plan for how Project UNIFY can benefit all students in the school.

Overall, however, most administrators are still trying to figure out what works best for their school with regards to social inclusion, and therefore are unsure of the role that Project UNIFY may play. It is evident that administrators understand that more thinking and strategy behind what Project UNIFY means to their school would be beneficial. Since Project UNIFY is flexible and can be adapted differently in every school, it requires thought and planning to assure that the activities align with a school's goals.

Several questions emerged from the interviews with administrators that may be useful for school staff, Project UNIFY liaisons, and administrators to consider together:

- What information does the administrator need about Project UNIFY to feel more informed?
- What are our school goals for Project UNIFY?
- How does our school measure the success of Project UNIFY?
- How does Project UNIFY align with other ongoing programs at the school?
- What are the different opportunities for students to get involved? Do we provide opportunities for student leadership?
- How will our staff handle difficult conversations about topics of acceptance and differences?
- How do we want this program to grow? Or sustain?
- Do our goals require a higher level of involvement from the administration?

## Vital Resource for Success

If an administrator is not on board or lacks the passion for Project UNIFY, finding staff who are is essential. Making a thoughtful effort to integrate Project UNIFY with a school's goals truly will strengthen any Project UNIFY school.

# Project UNIFY: Something State Programs May Learn from Highly Engaged Students

Although Project UNIFY is implemented at the national, state, and school levels, at its core it is a program designed to impact students. As such, determining the impact of Project UNIFY on students has been an ongoing goal of evaluation for the past three years. Last spring, the evaluation team at the Center for Social Development and Education visited nine schools and gathered insight from the students themselves. In conversations with over 20 students who were highly engaged in Project UNIFY programs in their schools, students talked about their motivations for getting involved, their participation in Project UNIFY, and their perspectives on how Project UNIFY influences their school environment.

## Why do students get involved?

In Project UNIFY schools, there is often a wide range of student involvement, with some students only peripherally aware of Project UNIFY, others involved primarily as participants who attend events and others who are highly engaged and involved in the planning of events and activities. It is these students engaged at the highest levels who are best positioned to help spread Project UNIFY throughout the school; thus, identifying these students and understanding why they get involved provide information on how best to engage students in Project UNIFY.

Although the students interviewed were involved in Project UNIFY in a range of ways, including as Unified Sports Partners®, Partners Club members,

and even club presidents, their reasons for getting involved were similar. Overall, there were two main reasons that students became involved with Project UNIFY: interest in meeting students with disabilities and a belief in the importance of inclusion. The students recognized that students with disabilities in their schools were often in different classes and did not interact very much with students outside of special education classrooms. Project UNIFY offered an opportunity to change that.

## Highly Engaged Students

The levels in which students get involved with Project UNIFY greatly depend on the school structure and liaison. In many schools, students take on roles assisting the liaison since the liaison's role is often quite involved with the decision making, planning and implementation in planning and implementing Project UNIFY. Overall, 62% of liaisons reported having students help in this way. However, some schools had students taking on more of a leadership role. For example, in some schools, students took on leadership roles in Partners Clubs. There were a variety of ways for students to become involved in these roles: some student leaders were chosen by the liaison (52%), others were elected by their peers (25%), and still others became involved in other ways (23%), such as volunteering or stepping up to assume responsibility.

In addition, in less than a third of the schools (28%) students are provided with the opportunity to

*"Especially being in high school when you're surrounded by a lot of unpleasant things, being with these kids, they bring a positive attitude back into your life and something you look forward to every day."*



*"You get to know all the students individually – their personalities, what they like, what they don't like. They're really outgoing, they don't hide anything from you."*

- Project UNIFY Liaison

take a lead role in the planning and implementation. This most often occurred at schools that were implementing the whole-school awareness component (example: R-Word Campaign). In schools with all three components of Project UNIFY, students were more likely to have roles as the main leaders in the planning and implementation of activities (41%) than were schools with fewer than three components (22%). This data suggests that students may be able to become involved in more central roles as schools build more intensive Project UNIFY programming.

It is also possible that student leadership is an evolving process. Many schools are just trying to figure out how to implement Project UNIFY activities and engaging students as leaders to help with the facilitation has not even crossed their minds. Schools mostly focus on getting students to participate, let alone take charge. However, as schools become more established over the years and have experience with implementation, student leadership might be seen as a benefit to helping with

implementation. There is evidence that schools participating in Project UNIFY in Years 2, 3, and 4 started with the sports and/or whole school/awareness component, and only later added the youth leadership component. Clearly for schools just starting off with Project UNIFY, youth leadership is not yet seen as a priority or solution to implementation challenges.

### **What impact does Project UNIFY have on students?**

For many of the students interviewed, Project UNIFY was a positive and educational experience. During Project UNIFY, students had the opportunity to meet new people, specifically students with disabilities. Through these interactions, some students learned that their peers with disabilities were more capable than they had originally believed. Many students also commented on the optimism of students with disabilities and the enjoyment they derived from interactions with these students.

*"At our Unified basketball games, the stands are more full than for the actual varsity games ... I think before the program started, walking down the hall – it was kind of like you'd glance at the other student and smile, but now it's like everyone's equal and no one's different, and it's just a community."*

Beyond meeting students with disabilities, many students also commented that Project UNIFY provided a welcoming and accepting environment. Project UNIFY provided a welcoming contrast to the difficulties of student life, as well as a space of positive energy that had an impact on their moods and outlook.

## What impact does Project UNIFY have on schools?

One of the main goals of Project UNIFY is to foster respect and acceptance in schools, assuring that everyone feels welcome and has the same opportunities to participate in the school activities. Overall, the students interviewed believed that Project UNIFY had benefited their schools in these areas. A number of students spoke about a change in the amount of social interaction between students with and without disabilities before and after Project UNIFY. Students without disabilities greeted and acknowledged their peers with disabilities more often in the hallways, and sometimes even beyond, as Unified Sports programs gained school-wide recognition.

While in some schools, Project UNIFY stays within a small club or group, there are other schools in which interest and involvement in Project UNIFY spreads throughout the school. In some such cases, the students interviewed told stories about recruiting their friends to participate or about increasing number of students wanting to become involved as more diverse activities were added to the Project UNIFY program-

ming. Certainly, this kind of expansion of Project UNIFY will be easier in some schools than others, but the stories of students like these show that such growth is possible. By involving first the students who are motivated to join Project UNIFY, and supporting them to spread interest in Project UNIFY to their peers, such expansion can become a reality.

## Where do you go from here?

The following questions can encourage liaisons and students to think about student engagement in their school and how to build on current involvement:

- Who are the really passionate students?
- How are passionate students being utilized to help the program?
- What are the opportunities students have to be involved?
- How can interest in Project UNIFY grow in the school?
- How does the liaison support student leaders?
- Does the liaison have tasks they could delegate to the students?
- How does the structure of Project UNIFY create opportunities for leadership?
- Which Project UNIFY component does the school focus on and how does that engage students?
- What does student leadership mean to the school?

**If you have any comments, questions or concerns please let us know.  
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