

Project UNIFY: School Case Summaries



Special Olympics Project UNIFY® has developed a set of strategies to integrate social inclusiveness in education systems, classroom practices, school climate and community engagement to ensure all students develop intellectual, physical, civic and emotional competencies.

Project UNIFY® strategies include service-learning curricula, Unified Sports® and Young Athletes™ programs, R-word campaigns and youth leadership development opportunities for young people with and without intellectual disabilities.

In 2011, Project UNIFY developed a set of protocols to examine the specific strategies schools employ to integrate and sustain the constellation of the above practices. By examining schools in depth, the process yields a deeper set of quality policy and practice options for other schools to consider, adopt and/or adapt. Another anticipated outcome, as we share the outcomes and impacts with education leaders and policymakers, is that schools across the country will better understand how to integrate and sustain socially inclusive characteristics.

The following school case summaries provide a snapshot of a select group of schools involved in Project UNIFY.

Cactus Shadow High School



Demographics

City: Cave Cree

State: Arizona

School Type: Public

Grade Levels: 9-12

Total Students: 1,772

Total Students: Schedule, Structure and Project UNIFY Participants

Meetings, interviews, focus groups and observations were organized by Brian Quinn, Special Olympics Arizona, and special education and general education teachers.

- Conversations with special education teacher
- Observations and interactions with members of the Student Council
- Conversation with general education teacher/ Student Council advisor
- Focus group with special and general education students
- Interview with school principal

Participants: Brian Quinn, Special Olympics Arizona; Sarah Wright and Terry Pickeral, Project UNIFY.

Information from Interviews, Focus Groups and Observations

According to the special education teacher and our observations there are multiple opportunities for special and general education students to interact at Cactus Shadows, including classroom, leadership,

Partner's Club, sports and extra-curricular activities. Observation was made of the student council members (120 students in student council) engaging all students during the lunchtime in two specific inclusive activities: (1) dipping their hand in paint and posting their handprint and signature on a large poster to indicate their commitment to equity; and (2) participating in "hammering a car" with statements of social injustice to represent their commitment to demolishing hatred and offensive words.

The student council faculty leader shared a story that recently a student posted on the Student Council Facebook page negative comments about the impact the Student Council members were making on reducing bullying on campus – the Student Council members were very upset that their work was misrepresented, however the teacher encouraged them to invite the student to their meetings and offer his insights and suggestions. Turns out the student felt very uncomfortable with the way other students were treating him and did not see any release – the teacher encouraged the student and his father to meet with the principal (and teacher) to discuss the student's experiences. During the deliberations, the teacher invited the student to join the Student Council, which he did and has provided suggestions and recommendations to enhance their work on social justice and inclusion. This demonstrates the commitment of the teacher and principal to listen to all voices and consider the experiences of all students. The students were taught how to consider different feedback and respond to different experiences of students.

During conversations with seven members of the Partner's Club to discuss their experiences, challenges and successes, they reported the following:

- "Sports is a great way for students with different abilities to join together as teammates."
- "While students initially may be reluctant to join the Partner's Club and consider inclusiveness you should not give up on them and continue to share your experiences and they may just come around to understand what we do, how we do it and what positive impacts it makes."
- "Partner's Club is the best part of my life."
- The students indicated that it still surprises them how many people show up for Special Olympics sports activities and how supportive they are of the athletes.
- Agreement that special and general education students were not just team mates but friends (forever).

The principal understands the Partner's Club, Student Council and Unified Sports® activities and supports them – special education students work in his office and thus he has daily contact with them and acknowledges their contributions to the school. He recognizes the school's progress in inclusion but also wants to enhance the opportunity for more students to understand inclusiveness and participate/contribute to it. Indicated that the community is very supportive of the school, however they have not passed recent bonds. He values how sports can be an appropriate platform for inclusion and was very proud of the workplace preparation programs for special education students they have at Cactus Shadows. Along with funding challenges he and his fellow principals struggle to effectively engage parents in their schools.

Strategies the School Employs to Integrate and Sustain Inclusiveness

Cactus Shadows integrates the following inclusive strategies:

- Unified Sports®
- Partner's Club
- Student Council
- Elective class for general education students to be with special education students

Challenges to Integrate and Sustain Inclusiveness in the School

Among the challenges expressed and observed during the school visit includes:

- Few special education students join Student Council in spite of recruitment strategies.
- Students in Student Council move at a quick pace and do not have time to effectively and frequently reflect on their efforts and how to make mid-course corrections to enhance their inclusive efforts – although they did change from a Valentine's Day Dance to a St. Patrick's Day Dance.
- Engaging more parents.

Critical Success Factors and Lessons Learned from the School Visit

- Administrative support is key.
- There is an identified "champion of Project UNIFY" in the school.
- Students have multiple opportunities to engage in creating a socially inclusive school climate through Student Council, elective courses, Unified Sports® and Partner's Club.

- Special and general education teacher’s work together to create quality opportunities for inclusiveness that is supported by the principal.
- The para-professionals in the special education classrooms are critical to effective inclusion activities.
- Readiness to integrate inclusive curriculum that has been developed and utilized in other schools in Arizona.

Implications for the School, State Program and Project UNIFY

Cactus Shadows has strong leadership by administration, special and general education and students. As they integrate the inclusive curriculum, Special Olympics Arizona can support and monitor their progress and challenges

and learn how to share with other schools; in addition the love students in the Partner’s Club is contagious and they should implement additional strategies to engage more students in the Partner’s Club.

Summary

Cactus Shadows High School takes inclusiveness seriously and shared leadership among adults and students to ensure the school is socially inclusive and bullying is reduced. Special and general education teachers work together to provide quality opportunities for students to engage in inclusive activities; Unified Sports® is popular and an effective inclusive strategy; and the administration is committed to continuously improving their inclusive efforts.

East Side High School



Demographics

City: Taylors

State: South Carolina

School Type: Public/High

Grade Levels: 9-12

Total Students: 1,223

Schedule, Structure and Project UNIFY Participants

Meetings, interviews, focus groups and observations were organized by Barbara Oswald, Special Olympics South Carolina, and special education and general education teachers.

- Conversations with principal, guidance staff, facilities staff, special education staff, football coach
- Observations and interactions with members of the Partners Club
- Observed lunch room activity including the parent run snack shop.

Participants: Barbara Oswald, Special Olympics South Carolina; Sarah Wright and Terry Pickeral, Project UNIFY.

Information from Interviews, Focus Groups and Observations

Interviews and conversations took place with the school principal, assistant principal, guidance staff, a special education teacher and facility staff.

The principal of Eastside has been at the school for 1.5 years with 29 previous years of experience as an administrator. Throughout the conversation

he kept referring to his school as “the little gem.” It was evident that he had full faith in his staff to create an environment where all students felt welcome and a part of that school community. He has numerous staff members who are alumnae of the school and very dedicated to their students.

Eastside has an inclusively student run coffee shop called the Eagle’s Nest that sits off of the cafeteria. This coffee shop is run primarily by those students who are involved in Special Education and supported by their peers. Also in the cafeteria are murals painted on the ceiling. A member of the facility staff worked with the students and administrators to allow the senior class to paint a mural on one of 7 large ceiling tiles. He said it was a way to engage all students and allow them to take pride in the building.

After seeing the cafeteria there was an opportunity to observe the Partner’s Club/Class that takes place at Eastside. This class was made up of those with and without disabilities. The student partners who were acting as “peer tutors” can receive elective credit for participating in this class. There is also an opportunity for student partners to receive class credit through a unified physical education class.

With that said there were a few students who had received the credit the year before and now continue to volunteer to participate in this group.

Strategies the School Employs to Integrate and Sustain Inclusiveness

- Involvement of all faculty and staff in the promotion of inclusiveness. It is not the responsibility of one person.
- Support an environment for learning and involvement .
- Allows students to be a part of the school beyond going to class.
- Develops strategies to involve all students in the school community.
 - Eagle’s Nest (coffee shop operated by those individuals in the special education class).
 - Students’ artwork being displayed through the school including ceiling tiles painted by the senior class as well as classroom tiles painted by the special education classes with the assistance of the art class.
 - Rising Eagles offers experiences for high-risk students.
- Strong parental support.
- The following are encouraged: Caring, participation, fun, positive relationships, hugs.

Challenges to Integrate and Sustain Inclusiveness in the School

- Students from the feeder middle schools are not necessarily use to this type of environment making it necessary to make sure every year that freshman understand the culture of inclusiveness.

Critical Success Factors and Lessons Learned

- Inclusive school environments = inclusiveness for all students not just Special Education students.
- If provided the opportunity, students will take advantage of it.
- Inclusiveness is a verb and not an adjective at this school.

Implications for the School, State Program and Project UNIFY

- This school was mostly likely ahead of the curve to begin with relative to social inclusion.
- Project UNIFY and Special Olympics South Carolina has been able to provide the support that enhances and deepens the activities taking place within the school supporting youth leadership and social inclusion.

Summary

This school is up front with its goals which include a priority to “a climate of inclusiveness.” This goal is achieved through a variety of ways shown above. This climate is fostered through a welcoming entrance, active participation of parents, administrator, faculty and staff support and opportunities for all to participate in their school community.

Integrating Project UNIFY and socially inclusive activities and programs into Eastside High School is much easier than other schools, given their commitment to inclusiveness and the expected responsibilities of all stakeholders (youth and adults) to ensure inclusiveness. This was evidenced by parents, students, facilities and office staff, coaches and special and general education teachers. Project UNIFY enhances the school’s commitment to inclusiveness rather than catalyzes inclusion.

Demographics

City: Glendale

State: Arizona

School Type: Public/High

Grade Levels: 9-12

Total Students: 1,785

Schedule, Structure and Project UNIFY Participants

Meetings, interviews, focus groups and observations were organized by Brian Quinn, Special Olympics Arizona, and special education and general education teachers and administrators/staff.

- Conversations with principal, assistance principal, staff and teachers (and college interns).
- Observations and interactions with members of Unified Sports Teams.
- Focus group with special and general education students.

Participants: Brian Quinn, Special Olympics Arizona ; Sarah Wright and Terry Pickeral, Project UNIFY.

Information from Interviews, Focus Groups and Observations

According to the school principal one of the determining factors that led him to apply for the position two years ago was an essay by a Kellis HS student on his experiences as a unified team member on campus and at the National Games in Omaha, NE. The principal indicated that the school is committed to every student every day, a commitment shared by students, parents, teachers,

staff and administrators. He shared that *“there is an exciting climate in the school that is influenced by many curricular and extra-curricular activities including Unified Sports and Best Buddies.”*

Faculty members indicated that students developing personal relationships with students different from them makes all the difference at the school and that these inclusive relationships are encouraged/supported by the administration. In addition, curriculum and student leadership focus on inclusion as well as frequent communications among students, teachers and administration about the importance and impacts of inclusion at Kellis.

In addition:

- All teachers at Kellis noted Unified Sports on a survey as a highlight of the school environment.
- “The opinions of the students weigh heaviest on my decisions and thoughts” – Jeff Wooten, Principal.
- Kellis graduate and former Unified Partner is now back student teaching in Special Education Department due to experiences in Unified Sports®.

16 special and general education students met as a focus group and shared their experiences, insights and impacts of Unified Sports®, providing the following:

- I learned patience as a team member.
- I can tell we are doing something good by all the students’ smiles.
- We get to know each other.

- It is sometimes challenging to work together but worth it.
- We get to make friends through sports.
- Coaches help us .
- It is more than sports abilities.
- I meet other students I otherwise would not meet.

Strategies the School Employs to Integrate and Sustain Inclusiveness

The following strategies are present at Kellis High School:

- Administrative support.
- Quality professional development.
- Finding the right people.
- Effective curriculum.
- Ensuring co-ownership.
- Quality guidance counselors.
- Quality with flexibility.
- District recognition of the importance of inclusion.
- Student leadership.
- Quality opportunities for special and general education students to join together through sports and classroom activities.
- Unified Sports®.
- Curriculum.
- Best Buddies®.

Challenges to Integrate and Sustain Inclusiveness in the School

Among the challenges expressed and observed during the school visit includes:

- Need for general education students to feel like a genuine team mate rather than a mentor/coach.
- More students could be engaged and need to find ways to do so though the curriculum and Unified Sports. Currently the Unified Sports® class is only open to 40 students.

Critical Success Factors and Lessons Learned

- There is an identified “champion of Project UNIFY” in the school.
- Administrative support is key; the principal is committed to inclusion and supports teachers through hiring process and professional development.
- Involvement of general education teachers, special education teachers, guidance counselors, varsity coaches and supporting staff pave the path for social inclusion at Kellis.
- Unified Sports® is successful and builds social relationships because the faculty understands the benefits to individuals and the school.
- The inclusive curriculum engages more students through classroom lessons and activities.

Implications for the School, State Program and Project UNIFY

Kellis has strong leadership by administration, faculty, staff, counselor and students. They can share their strategies with other schools in the district and Valley.

Special Olympics Arizona can support Kellis and engage other schools by:

- Offering opportunities for teachers to network beyond their schools.
- Provide schools with a list of participating Project UNIFY schools in Arizona.
- Share information on enhancing student voice.
- Hold in-service training day at Kellis for other schools / districts to come in to view the unified class, receive training and hold a Q & A with teachers and students.
- Create more opportunities for coaches and teachers from different schools to interact and share.

Summary

The inclusive curriculum is very effective and allows for faculty to integrate inclusiveness through classroom lessons and activities.

Best Buddies is an effective strategy for special and general education students to join together and create friendships. Unified Sports® is also an effective inclusive engagement strategy.

Kellis High School would like to know about similar inclusive efforts in Arizona and have opportunities to network with colleagues in the local area.

South Junior High School



Demographics

City: Boise

State: ID

School Type: Public/High

Grade Levels: 7-9

Total Students: 613

Schedule, Structure and Project UNIFY Participants

Meetings, interviews, focus groups and observations were organized by Shanna Endow, Special Olympics Idaho, and special education and general education teachers and administrators/staff.

- Conversations with principal and teachers.
- Observations and interactions with teachers and students.
- Focus group with special and general education students.

Participants: Shanna Endow, Special Olympics Idaho; Andrea Cahn, Sarah Wright and Terry Pickeral, Project UNIFY.

Information from Interviews, Focus Groups and Observations

Interviews and conversations took place with the school principal, students and teachers.

The school principal, Betty Olsen, appreciates and tries to create a staff that values the traits of an inclusive school. She believes that they have created a level playing field at South through a variety of avenues which includes sports, ROTC and

an inclusive music class.

Six special education students took part in a conversation. In this conversation they expressed that they were most proud of their school for the following:

- Auditorium, uniforms (brings equity to the school), basketball team, openness to learning, supports student's strengths, good attitudes, and team spirit.

When asked how they describe their teachers the students responded with the following:

- Knowledgeable, trusting, believe in students, knows students can succeed, good attitudes, know how to relate one-on-one.

When asked what activities the students are engaged in that bring them together they responded with the following:

- Builders Club, sports, music, National Honor Society, other clubs.

When asked about what students need to know when they are transitioning to South from elementary school the students responded with the following:

- It's initially hard when you are new, bigger size, more students, suddenly you are at the bottom, multiple classes, you need to be adaptive.

The students were then asked about opportunities for leadership at their school to which they said the following:

- First before you can lead others you need to lead yourself.
- Students need to earn it.
- Teachers are receptive to leadership.

These students who participated in this conversation had recently attended the Special Olympics Idaho Youth Activation Summit. When asked what are the next steps they plan to do as a result of their attendance at the summit they responded with the following:

- Create an R-Word Campaign and increase their Unified Sport® opportunities.

Conversations with teachers focused on how they implemented inclusive class opportunities for students. Among the strategies they identified:

- Teamwork in class, special and general education students working together.
- Unified Sports® during lunch time.
- Tutoring that leads to development of friendships.
- After School clubs .
- Engaging parents in school-based activities.
- Being able to share strategies with other teachers through the school's problem-solving team.
- Reviewing research on student progress and challenges.

The school has also created a "problem-solving team" that addresses issues of inclusion, diversity and student progress and success. This team is comprised of a counselor, nurse, psychologist, social worker and others.

Strategies the School Employs to Integrate and Sustain Inclusiveness

The following strategies are present at South Junior High School:

- Unified Sports®
- Athletics
- Sciences
- After-School Clubs
- Art Club
- Build on Students' Interests

- Extend to families and community
- Builders Club
- R-Word Campaign
- Music
- National Honor Society
- Problem-Solving Team

Challenges to Integrate and Sustain Inclusiveness in the School

- Assumption by the principal that it takes external resources to implement inclusive activities and programs.
- More students could/should be engaged in inclusive activities.
- More student leadership opportunities needed so that more students are in leadership positions and learn how to lead.
- Move Unified Sports® from "lunch-time only" to more frequent.
- Engaging more faculty and providing more support for the faculty "point person" so that he does not burn out by "carrying the load".
- Additional information is needed on specific school-based inclusive strategies and also on differentiated levels of engagement.

Critical Success Factors and Lessons Learned

- There is an identified "champion of Project UNIFY" in the school.
- Administrative support is key; the principal's personal stories of inclusion greatly influences her and her staff/students.
- There is a consistent theme of empathy heard from teachers and students.
- Inclusiveness is a common concept among teachers and students.
- Equity is commonly discussed.

- Engagement is an effective strategy for inclusion.
- There is a readiness for students and teachers to enhance existing opportunities for inclusiveness, engagement and student leadership.
- General education have the desire/need to be educated on working with students with differing abilities to enhance the their work in an inclusive environment.

Implications for the School, State Program and Project UNIFY

Special Olympics Idaho should

1. continue to work with the principal and suggest ways of focusing existing resources for inclusive activities (the State's ELN can be helpful here as well);
2. encourage the principal to talk to other principals in the Boise area and share South Junior High School's inclusive practices and encourage her peers to consider, adopt and/or adapt inclusive practices; and
3. highlight South Junior High Schools' inclusive progress and success in their publications, resources and reports.

Summary

South Junior High School has a very effective champion in a general education teacher who has secured the commitment of the principal – leading to many inclusive classrooms, sports and extra-curricular activities that engage special and general education students and their parents. Sports and arts are two special classes/activities that are inclusive with demonstrable results. Students express that they have good experiences in the school and that there should be more opportunities to them to enhance their leadership knowledge and skills and also to engage more students as inclusive leaders.

Demographics

City: Boise

State: Idaho

School Type: Public/Elementary

Grade Levels: PK-6

Total Students: 468

Schedule, Structure and Project UNIFY Participants

A set of observations, student focus groups, faculty conversations and a discussion with the principal were scheduled by Shanna Endow for the school visit.

Participants: Shanna Endow, Special Olympics Idaho; Andrea Cahn, Sarah Wright and Terry Pickeral, Project UNIFY.

Information from Interviews, Focus Groups and Observations

Interviews and conversations took place with the school principal, teachers and students.

Observations took place in a Physical Education class.

The school Principal, Ms. Anderson, is in her first year at White Pines. Upon arrival she made the decision to support strategies that focused on effective student development. She emphasized that “all students are our students.” She is aware of and supports inclusive strategies such as PE Buddies taking place in her school along with Reading Buddies and forthcoming Lunch Room Buddies. (PE Buddies are current 6th graders who

assist in a PE class for students with Autism. The students pair up with their peer and assist with all of the activities taking place in that PE class.)

Ms. Anderson, recognizes the importance of the Project UNIFY liaison in their school and the work she does with other teachers to integrate inclusion in the classroom.

She firmly believes there is a commitment to integrate the inclusive strategies in these programs to full-school integration (bleeding over from program to school-wide).

Daily she sees students “stepping up” to take leadership and responsibility and is pleased there these opportunities exist throughout the school.

She is willing to share inclusive strategies with other principals in the district as well as inform the district communications department.

The brief conversations that were held with teachers at White Pine yielded the following information:

- Teri engages 6th grade students as PE Buddies and sees friendship develop over the year beyond the PE class and activities; she also has the 6th grade students train 5th grade students to be leaders next year (PE Buddies).
- Jenny Tobin is the physical education teacher and organizes (allows the students to lead) corresponding PE Buddy activities.
- Lisa is teacher and liaison.

The conversation with the “Buddies” that assist their peers in the PE class students provided great insight. The students were asked about their experience as a “buddy” and why they participate in the program. Some of their answers included:

- It is the right thing to do.
- It is good for the community.

When the students were asked what they would tell future “buddies” that would help prepare them for this program, one student said, “You really just have to care.” Another student sighted the need for patience.

The same students also relayed that sometimes it is difficult to work with peers that cannot communicate in the same manner as them but over the course of being a “buddy” they have been able to learn a lot about their friends and what they like and don’t like.

Strategies the School Employs to Integrate and Sustain Inclusiveness

The following strategies are present at White Pine:

- Lisa, the Project UNIFY liaison, is critical to the progress and success of inclusive activities at White Pines Elementary School. She has assisted interested faculty and encouraged other faculty to create inclusive opportunities for general and special education students.
- PE Buddies is very effective and builds fitness and friendship.
- Using PE Buddies as an example of inclusiveness which led to Reading Buddies and soon to Lunch Buddies.

Challenges to Integrate and Sustain Inclusiveness in the School

- Building on the principal’s commitment and the current inclusive activities, a challenge is how

to expand to more classes, more teachers and more inclusive opportunities for special and general education students.

- How to provide formal opportunities for students to gain leadership knowledge and skills is another challenge.

Critical Success Factors and Lessons Learned

- Administrative support is key.
- There is an identified “champion” at the school
- A variety of teachers are involved in the Buddies program.
- Students are given the opportunity to create friendships through the Buddies Program.

Implications for the School, State Program and Project UNIFY

Special Olympics Idaho should take advantage of the principal’s willingness to share their inclusive experiences with other leaders in the district; and also design an elementary level student leadership training opportunity to provide leadership knowledge and skills to young students.

Project UNIFY can share the PE Buddies and Reading Buddies activities through their formal and informal networks.

Summary

White Pines Elementary School provides high-quality inclusive opportunities through their PE Buddies and Reading Buddies activities. The principal’s and liaison’s commitment to inclusiveness is critical to integrating and sustaining inclusiveness in the school. The current inclusive activities are leading to additional opportunities for more students and teachers to engage in inclusive activities.