

State and School Models

Over the past four years, Special Olympics Project UNIFY® has been establishing itself as a national school-based program. Today, there are over 2,000 schools from across the country that have embraced Project UNIFY. Similar to other programs of Special Olympics, where variation exists from state to state, Project UNIFY varies in both its structure and implementation strategies. The flexibility of the Project UNIFY guidelines created by Special Olympics allows State Programs to mold Project UNIFY to fit within each school's goals and existing programs. This guidebook of different Project UNIFY models was created to support Project UNIFY State Special Olympics staff, liaisons, administrators, and students with the knowledge that there is not one right way to do Project UNIFY.

In the spring of 2012, staff from the University of Massachusetts at Boston visited several different State Special Olympics Programs and schools participating in Project UNIFY. The visits and resulting interviews with State Special Olympics staff, schools, and students revealed Project UNIFY as a program that is vastly unique depending on the

state and the school within that state. Even though there is great variability in State Special Olympics Programs and schools, there are some common themes that emerged regarding "what works" for Project UNIFY. We found that there are defining characteristics that any Project UNIFY school or state model can strive for.

While no Project UNIFY school or state should be limited by these defining characteristics, since schools and organizations are continually evolving, they can be used as benchmarks or goals for what your school and State Special Olympics Program can work toward.

Where did we go?

Colorado Missouri
Michigan North Carolina

Who did we talk to?

Project UNIFY Liaisons Teachers Students
with intellectual disabilities
Special Olympics State Staff
Administrators Students
without intellectual disabilities

"In our school, there's so much that's student driven – we really need to find a way for our student leadership group to share opportunities with the whole school so Project UNIFY is student driven. At this school, if something is not student driven, we don't get a lot of buy in."

-Administrator

"Our goal or vision is to have students who will advocate for one another. Knowing that some of our students will grow up to be people in leadership roles, we want them to understand that everyone has value and friendships can be made even though we may be different. We want students not to shun one another but embrace each other knowing that we are all different, but have many of the same wants and needs."

-State Special Olympics Project UNIFY Staff

State Models

Project UNIFY has created new roles and responsibilities for Special Olympics staff in terms of partnering with schools beyond sports, asking them to move toward being involved in the socialization practices in the school. Many states are still trying to figure out how to implement Project UNIFY given the capacity of their staff and priorities in their state. As State Special Olympics Programs continue to evolve, their structure for implementing their Project UNIFY State model will likely change in an effort to find the best way to work with schools. While there is no right or wrong way for implementing Project UNIFY, there are certainly different models for how State Special Olympics Programs can support schools.

Top Down Model

One of the main aspects of the top down model is that State Special Olympics Programs regard Project UNIFY as a program that they are responsible for implementing. With that responsibility comes an understanding that support must be provided to create quality programming in Project UNIFY schools. This generally means that there is a high level of involvement by Program staff in the schools from not only the initial meeting with administration and the signing of a contract, but also a presence throughout the year. Special Olympics provides all the materials for various Project UNIFY initiatives and related

activities, they help generate ideas around what activities a school could do, and they get to know students and even personally recruit youth for the state YAC. In the top down model State Special Olympics Programs know exactly what Project UNIFY looks like and how it is being implemented in their schools.

Mixed Model

In the mixed model, State Special Olympics Programs are very involved in the sports component of Project UNIFY but generally allow the designated school liaison to run the education, awareness and inclusion-based portion of the Project UNIFY program independently in the school. Programs support schools by connecting students with and without disabilities to recreation activities, specifically Unified and Traditional Special Olympics Sports that generally take place outside of the school. In this model, Programs generally allocate their staff throughout the state, and utilize area directors, to locally support schools with all aspects of Project UNIFY related to sports.

Even though the liaison feels supported by Special Olympics for Project UNIFY (e.g. materials are provided), they tend to think about Project UNIFY and Special Olympics as separate entities, and not connected. In the mixed model, Project UNIFY occurs in the school and Special Olympics provides students with and without disabilities the opportunity to interact outside of the school through sports.

Bottom Up Model

One of the main aspects of the bottom up model is that State Special Olympics Programs encourage schools to figure out how to make Project UNIFY work for their school and students. Generally State Special Olympics Programs view Project UNIFY as a grant which provides Special Olympics an opportunity to “do business differently” when it comes to their relationships with schools. Programs believe that schools know what is best in terms of adapting and implementing Project UNIFY. Schools in these states are often recruited because they had existing programs being implemented in their schools that are complementary to the values of Project UNIFY, or school cultures that aligned with its goals and objectives.

Generally these State Special Olympics Programs utilize grassroots strategies to get schools involved with Project UNIFY; they build relationships with schools at the ground level and through several tiers of support- from local volunteer coordinators, to area directors, to state Project UNIFY managers - schools become connected to Project UNIFY. While some states employ this strategy because they

believe that grassroots efforts are the best way to do business, other states simply feel they lack the capacity to provide a higher level of involvement in the school. In the bottom up model, State Special Olympics Programs view their role in Project UNIFY as providing schools with funding and materials that they need to be successful.

School Models

One of the major distinguishing factors for how school models can be described is through which platform their school either started Project UNIFY or by what is prioritized most in their programming. Generally schools usually focus on either the inclusive sports component of Project UNIFY or the school-wide education and awareness and youth leadership components. Incorporating a program like Project UNIFY into a school culture takes great time and dedication. The platform in which schools start certainly does not limit the growth of Project UNIFY; however, it can look different depending on how the State Special Olympics Program explains Project UNIFY along with where the liaison’s interests lie.

“Sports is just an opportunity for interaction. I am more about getting the students out of the special education classrooms and into the general education classrooms. I am about raising awareness about students with disabilities and inclusion!”

-Project UNIFY Liaison

- 1) **Inclusive Sports** – students with or without intellectual disabilities have opportunities to participate in sports activities alongside one another, which leads to the most conducive activity for breaking down stereotypes.
- 2) **Youth Leadership & Advocacy** – students with and without intellectual disabilities take on leadership roles to promote Project UNIFY activities in their school and in their community.
- 3) **Whole School Engagement** – all students in the school have an opportunity to participate in Project UNIFY through school-wide activities.

Sports Based Model

One of the main aspects of the sports based model is that the Project UNIFY school has strong roots in the sports component of programming through the establishment of Unified Sports teams, Traditional Special Olympics teams, or recreational Unified Sports activities. A school that has strong roots in sports programming for Project UNIFY generally was involved in these activities with Special Olympics before Project UNIFY existed. Since they already had sports programming established in the school, the transition to Project UNIFY seemed like a natural progression. Schools that embody this model often have more challenges incorporating the other components into the school and connecting them to Project UNIFY. Specifically, schools find it difficult to gain teacher and whole school support since there is often confusion around what Project UNIFY is and how it is different from just Unified Sports or Traditional Special Olympics Sports.

School-Wide/Youth Leadership Based Model

The main aspect of this model is that the school focuses on the school-wide education and awareness and youth leadership components of Project UNIFY. An important point is that these schools commonly embodied the same values that Project UNIFY programming brings to schools before becoming involved, but Project UNIFY has helped to formalize the importance of acceptance and social inclusion. This type of model is evident in a school with strong values and goals for inclusionary practices as well as a passionate liaison who is dedicated to increasing the interactions among students with and without disabilities.

These schools also focus on the importance of having active student leadership to help raise awareness about the importance of social inclusion. The schools are generally not as involved with the sports component as many perceive the inclusive sports activities as merely an opportunity for students to interact and have fun. The attention and primary focus for the liaison is generally on raising awareness and promoting inclusion and leadership in the school. Schools that embody this model tend to have a different relationship with Special Olympics since they are not as enmeshed with the sports component. This may have something to do with the fact that many schools still perceive Special Olympics as a sports organization and, therefore, are unsure how to incorporate Special Olympics sports programming into the school.

Tips for State Special Olympics Programs and Schools

The next section provides an overview of the defining Project UNIFY characteristics identified from the State Special Olympics Programs and the schools that participated in the site visit interviews. Through this process certain characteristics and themes emerged. These can be viewed as best practice advice and should be shared to promote

capacity building and continual improvement for Project UNIFY. While some characteristics may not apply to certain State Special Olympics Programs or schools, they are simply observations of some of the work being achieved through Project UNIFY across the country.

Defining Characteristics of Project UNIFY State Special Olympics Programs

- State Special Olympics Programs understand the value of Project UNIFY in their state. This value is understood when State Special Olympics Programs recognize Project UNIFY as a program that they take responsibility for.
- State Special Olympics Programs have dedicated Project UNIFY staff each with their own responsibilities and roles.
- State Special Olympics Programs have a Project UNIFY contract that is signed with schools that outlines the responsibilities of each in the partnership and formalizes a school's commitment.
- State Special Olympics Programs work toward supporting individual liaisons in schools throughout the year.
- State Special Olympics Programs understand that an administrator is not the only entry point into schools, but know that in order to enhance the quality of Project UNIFY and move

toward a school-wide program, State Special Olympics Programs need to make an effort to build that school partnership.

- State Special Olympics Programs allow schools the freedom and flexibility to implement Project UNIFY activities that fit within their school context (a feature of the program that is highly valued by liaisons).

Defining Characteristics of Project UNIFY Schools

- Initiatives are student-driven: students listen and respond best to students. In many schools we see liaisons working tirelessly to plan, facilitate and motivate students and school staff to get involved; however, in many schools students have taken on the responsibility and created a leadership base where students drive Project UNIFY.
- The administration understands the value of Project UNIFY. When presented with Project UNIFY, some administrators ask themselves "Well, why wouldn't we do this?" However, while other administrators believe that Project UNIFY's goals and values are important, they may need more information to understand how the program can influence student outcomes and how program activities tie to school goals.

"Before students used to laugh at the special education students, but to me they are special because special means good."

-Student in Project UNIFY School

- Administration is dedicated to the sustainability of the program by helping to see that more staff and students become involved.
- Students with and without disabilities work together in both the planning and participation of Project UNIFY activities through a Partner's Club (or similar type club). Many schools implement Fan Clubs or student leadership groups that plan activities to do with students process is not always inclusive. Partner's Clubs that embody both planning and participation often result in more teamwork and better understanding of how to communicate with different people.
- Awareness of Project UNIFY in the school by both staff and students is over 50%. In many schools Project UNIFY is limited to the club or class setting in which activities take place. Schools that have focused on spreading the word about involvement and providing an opportunity to those who would not normally become involved has been key to building school awareness.
- Project UNIFY liaisons are supported by other school staff taking on responsibility for various aspects of Project UNIFY activities. Many liaisons report spending anywhere from 3-15 hours a week on Project UNIFY and face the challenge of getting others to take on responsibility. The key strategy for liaisons is to delegate responsibilities both to students and school staff. As opposed to asking for general help, liaisons who provide specific roles that other school staff can take successful in decreasing their work load. By including more school staff this also increases the sense that Project UNIFY is a school-wide program.
- Liaisons value feeling that they are a part of a partnership with the State Special Olympics staff.

Tools for Capacity Building and Moving Forward

Some of the most valuable questions asked of State Special Olympics staff, liaisons, administrators, and students could be interesting questions for your school or Program to consider as well. These questions helped stakeholders think about how they could enhance their program or how they need to think more thoroughly about what their hopes for Project UNIFY are for the future.

State Special Olympics Programs

- Do you use criteria for determining whether a school would be good for Project UNIFY?
- What types of external technical assistance, guidelines, and/or resources are available to schools who implement Project UNIFY?
- Do you have a specific model for what Project UNIFY should look like in a school?
- What do you view as the goals of Project UNIFY? Do these goals vary for different schools?
- How do you handle varying goals?

Liaisons

- What are your goals for implementing Project UNIFY in your school?
- How is your Project UNIFY club or program organized?
- How much of your own time do you put in to Project UNIFY?
- Are there any other major community partners involved in the Project UNIFY planning process? If so, who are they?
- How do you view Project UNIFY in your school (school-wide program, club)?
- What types of students get involved/ have gotten involved in Project UNIFY? How do you get students involved?
- Do you view Project UNIFY as being a sustainable program at your school?
- What do you feel students with (and without) disabilities gain from this program?
- Has anything changed in your school as a result of Project UNIFY?

Administrators

- What are your goals for Project UNIFY in your school?
- What outcomes do you expect from the school's implementation of PU?
- Do you think Project UNIFY is meeting these goals? How can you tell?
- Does Project UNIFY fit within your school improvement plan?
- Do you view Project UNIFY as being a sustainable program at your school?

Students

- Why did you get involved with Project UNIFY?
- If other students ask you what Project UNIFY is, what do you tell them?
- What are your goals for Project UNIFY in your school?
- Have you seen anything change at your school as a result of Project UNIFY?
- Has anything changed for you personally as a result of Project UNIFY?

**If you have any comments, questions or concerns please let us know.
We would love to hear more about your state or school model.
Thank you!!**

**Center for Social Development and Education
University of Massachusetts Boston**
Jennifer Ross, Project UNIFY Evaluation Coordinator
617-287-7258 • Jennifer.Ross@umb.edu