

Special Olympics Oregon

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Project UNIFY Case Study Report

Submitted

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Executive Summary

Special Olympics Oregon (SOOR) is in its fourth year of Project UNIFY. This case study project delved deeply into four schools that have successfully implemented Project UNIFY. Interviews and/or surveys were conducted with staff, administrators, parents, students with ID (intellectual disability), and students without ID who are involved with the program. Four high schools were involved: Parkrose, Sutherlin, Forest Grove, and Rainier.

It is important to note that case study research is not generalizable to the population. That is, what was discovered at selected Project UNIFY schools may not be true across all Project UNIFY schools. The focus of the research was to understand impact. The insights gained from the selected sites will provide valuable information into how successful schools are impacting students with ID. The results may then inform future program activities, structure, and overall design.

This case study project sought to address the following key question: What impact has Project UNIFY had on students with intellectual disabilities? To understand impact, we defined what behaviors, attitudes, and/or actions reflect impact. These were defined by Project UNIFY staff in three areas and the results are as follows:

1. Progress Toward Overall Project Goal. Project UNIFY’s overall program goal to promote dignity, respect, and to advocate for people with ID was met across all four schools. Specific examples were provided by students, staff, parents, and/or administrators during interviews and each school had numerous stories to share, including: a Parkrose student with ID received a standing ovation after singing in the school talent show; a Rainier student with ID was named Winter Ball Queen alongside a student without ID who was a football player; students with ID at Forest Grove performed with students without ID in a school-wide performance of a play on bullying; and after the R-Word campaign at Sutherlin, many students without ID and teachers reportedly shared having a new understanding of why inclusion is so important.

This suggests that Project UNIFY is shifting the school culture toward one of overall acceptance. Students with ID that were once sitting alone at “their” lunch table are now a part of the school.

“I feel that before Project UNIFY many students with disabilities (for the most part) were ignored and/or overlooked. But with it, there are many opportunities for interactions and many friendships formed that wouldn’t be there otherwise.”
—Sutherlin student

“UNIFY has opened up the eyes of everyone to WANT to show respect, dignity and advocate for what they believe is right.”
—Rainier Student

“I think general education students have shown more respect for students with disabilities. They don’t use the R-word. They are empowering themselves and empowering Special Education students to advocate.”
—Parkrose staff member

2. Project UNIFY activities will encourage social interactions

between students with and without ID. Across all schools, there was evidence that Project UNIFY encouraged social interactions between students with ID and students without ID. Interactions need an incubator space, and Project UNIFY’s Partners Club and Unified Sports provides that space. They eat lunch together, go to movies, and join in other social activities.

3. Students with ID will be included in the school community. Data suggest that the more years a school is engaged with Project UNIFY, the more likely students with ID will participate in school activities such as committees and clubs. For example, Forest Grove and Sutherlin have both been involved in Project UNIFY since its inception. They also had the highest number of students with ID involved with school activities such as student council, school committees, and other school-related activities. This is compared to Rainer and Parkrose, both of which have

fewer years in Project UNIFY and fewer students with ID reported being involved with school activities.

Two key unexpected outcomes were revealed in this project:

1. **Social interactions for parents of students with ID increased.** Parents of students with ID at Forest Grove reported that Project UNIFY gave them much-needed opportunities to connect with other parents, thereby increasing their own social interactions.
2. **Project UNIFY inspired a social justice program.** Rainier reported that Project UNIFY inspired the implementation of a whole new program at the school titled “Exceptional Child.” The program aims to address issues of social justice by providing students without ID the opportunity to earn credit assisting a student with ID with reading, learning, and overall peer support.

“Project UNIFY has gotten everyone involved. Not nearly as many outlets for students if we didn’t have UNIFY.”
—Forest Grove student

There were three key elements of success identified in this project. These are as follows:

1. Engage students without ID: Provide students without ID the opportunity to coordinate, plan, and/or lead Project UNIFY

activities. By having a large group of students at multiple grade levels, the student leadership can continue to be passed from year to year without losing knowledge on how to implement activities.

2. **Share leadership**: Distribute Project UNIFY tasks such as coordinating volunteers, paperwork, and so on, among at least two school staff members.

3. **Supportive administrators**: The role of the administrator is to authorize activities, help secure funds, and provide overall support to staff and student leadership as they implement Project UNIFY activities.

Data related to understanding overall implementation were captured. The following highlights key findings and recommendations:

- **School profile**: The four schools had very different demographics, some with a large student body, some small; some were diverse, others were not. The key finding here was that demographics did not play a role in Project UNIFY's success. Project UNIFY can be successfully implemented in schools regardless of size (large or small) and ethnic composition (high or low minority percentages), and if the percentage of students receiving free and reduced lunch is sizable, i.e., greater than half.
Recommendation: Continue to reach out to schools, regardless of demographics.
- **Point of entry**: How exactly did each school engage with Project UNIFY? Each has a slightly different story. The common thread is that each school heard about Project UNIFY through an outreach effort from Special Olympics Oregon.
Recommendation: Special Olympics Oregon should continue outreach activities.
- **Project UNIFY Student participation**: Schools participated in a range of activities, from Partners Club to Unified Sports. Each school is different, so having a menu of options available is important. Some activities were non-sport, such as a play produced at Forest Grove.
Recommendation: Offer a range of activities, sport and non-sport, to engage all students (with or without ID).

In summary, this case study project revealed deep insights into program impact and implementation. Data suggest students with ID are more included in their school communities, have more social interactions with students without ID, and overall are more accepted in the school. Though implementation can vary from school to school, there was consistent evidence that there was a positive impact at each school. Project UNIFY inspired students, staff, and parents to shift their school culture from one of isolation to acceptance. These activities empower students without ID to be change advocates for students with ID to be a part of the school, and ultimately to make progress toward the program goal of “promoting dignity, respect, and acceptance for people with intellectual disabilities.”

Acknowledgments

Many thanks to Special Olympics Oregon for engaging in this project. It has been a privilege to be a part of it. Special thanks to Jean Hansen and Alix Wastenev for coordinating data collection activities, providing thorough secondary data, and overall making this project possible. Thank you to staff, parents, and students at Parkrose, Forest Grove, Sutherlin, and Rainier High Schools for sharing their time and valuable insights.

Thank you for inviting me to be a part of this project.

~ Chari Smith, CRSmith Consulting

Introduction

Special Olympics Oregon (SOOR) is in its fourth year of Project UNIFY. The goal of this project is to “promote dignity, respect, and acceptance for people with intellectual disabilities.” In the 2011-12 school year, there were approximately 32 Oregon schools participating in Project UNIFY.

Special Olympics Oregon has the opportunity to be the leader in measuring the impact that Project UNIFY has had on students with intellectual disabilities. This project is the natural next step to the pilot study completed in spring 2011, the focus of which was to identify best practices for doing research with students that have ID. The result was a tested process to gather data from students with ID. This included a read-aloud survey administered to students with ID (athletes) by trained staff following the Regional Unified Basketball Competition (March 2011).

This project will delve deeper into select schools that have successfully implemented Project UNIFY. It will identify key characteristics of success, best practices, and determine how the goal of promoting dignity, respect, and acceptance is being fulfilled.

Methodology

A case study by definition provides in-depth information about a single case. Sharan B. Merriam, author of *Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education* (2001), defines it as follows: “A qualitative case study is an intensive, holistic, description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon, or social unit” (p. 27). A key benefit of doing case study research is to delve deeply into a specific site. This is generally accomplished through field observations, interviews, and document reviews.

It is also important to note that case study research is not generalizable to the population. That is, what is discovered at selected Project UNIFY schools may not be true across all Project UNIFY schools. The focus of the research is to understand impact. The insights gained from the selected sites will provide valuable information into how successful schools are having an impact on students with ID. The results may then inform future program activities, structure, and overall design.

This case study project will address the following key research question:

What impact has Project UNIFY had on students with intellectual disabilities (ID)?

To understand impact, it is first important to define what behaviors, attitudes, and/or actions reflect impact. These were defined by Project UNIFY staff as follows:

- Project UNIFY activities will encourage social interactions between students with and without ID.

- Students with ID will be included in the school community.
- Students with ID are treated with dignity, respect, and acceptance.

School Selection Process

In the fall 2011, there were thirty-two schools enrolled in Project UNIFY. Criteria were established to identify which schools would participate in the case study research, as follows:

- Site Liaison agreed to be considered as a case study school for this project
- School has participated in Project UNIFY for at least one year
- School has participated in at least two Project UNIFY activities per year (on or off site)
- School plans to do at least one Project UNIFY activity on-site between January and May
- The number of students with ID involved with Project UNIFY is at least ten

Based on these criteria, the following four schools participated in the case study:

- Parkrose
- Rainier
- Forest Grove
- Sutherlin

The focus of the case study project is to understand the impact that Project UNIFY has had on students with ID. Data were captured through document reviews, site visits, and secondary data sources. Interviews and/or surveys were conducted with staff, administrators, parents, students with ID, and students without ID who are involved with the program.

School Profile

There are a few demographic differences and similarities across the Project UNIFY school sites that are worth noting (see Table 1). Two of the schools, Parkrose and Forest Grove, are large and more ethnically diverse, whereas the other two schools, Rainier and Sutherlin, are smaller and less diverse. Despite these differences in size and ethnicity, each school has a similar percentage of students participating in the Free and Reduced Lunch program with an average of 57% and ranging from a high of 68.3% at Parkrose and a low of 48.2% at Rainier. The schools also serve a similar percentage of students with ID with an average of 2.5% and ranging from a high of 3.6% at Sutherlin and a low of 1.6% at Parkrose.

Table 1: School Demographic Profiles

Attribute	Description/Number			
	Parkrose	Rainier	Forest Grove	Sutherlin
Grade span	9–12	7–12	9–12	9–12
Total enrollment	1031	492	1990	450
Total students with ID	17 (1.6%)	13 (2.6%)	40 (2.0%)	16 (3.6%)
Ethnicity (total)				
White	409 (39.7%)	450 (91%)	1,063 (54%)	367 (81.8%)
Hispanic/Latino	213 (20.7%)	16 (3.3%)	826 (41.9%)	47 (10.4%)
African American	119 (11.5%)	1 (0.2%)	12 (0.6%)	3 (0.7%)
Asian/Pacific Islander	192 (18.6%)	3 (0.6%)	24 (1.2%)	4 (0.9%)
Native American	14 (1.4%)	6 (1.2%)	9 (0.5%)	14 (3.1%)
Unknown	0	0	0	0
Total Minority	622 (60.3%)	40 (8.1%)	871 (43.8%)	83 (18.4%)
Percentage of students on Free and Reduced Lunch				
Percentage of students on Free and Reduced Lunch	68.30%	48.2%	58.30%	53.8%
Student attendance rate	88.40%	90.7%	91.60%	92.6%
Staffing				
Administrators	4	2	2.9	2
Licensed teachers	49.1	23.5	85.7	23.5
Instructional assistants	10.6	14	29.3	4.3
Total FTE	101.5	47.1	146.5	40

Each of the Project UNIFY schools offers a range of academic and supportive services to its students with ID. The academic program delivery systems at Parkrose, Forest Grove, and Sutherlin are integration-leaning. They provide similar academic programming for students with ID characterized by the wide use of mainstream class settings with supports as needed (i.e., instructional aides), as well as customized pullout sessions for subjects such as math, reading, and writing. Slightly different is Rainier, which offers mainstream classes with support available (i.e., instructional aides), but most students with ID complete their academic work in a Special Education setting.

In addition, each school offers some nonacademic programming for students with ID. While there are differences in the content of this additional programming, most of it is intended to develop a variety of life skills. Parkrose offers Life Education for Adults at Parkrose (LEAP), a community-based transition service with a goal of ensuring that 18- to 21-year-old students navigate into adulthood successfully. Similarly, Sutherlin offers community integration programming to its older population of students with ID that includes job placement services. Forest Grove’s life skills programming addresses things like banking and transportation and is offered in a reverse-mainstreaming fashion such that some general

education students attend these program sessions alongside students with ID. Rainier offers yet another life skills program, Youth Transitions Program, but makes it available to a wider range of ages, 14–21.

Although the research conducted at each school is a case study and by definition not generalizable, it appears that Project UNIFY can be successfully implemented in schools regardless of size (large or small) and ethnic composition (high or low minority percentages), and if the percentage of students receiving free and reduced lunch is sizable, i.e., greater than half.

Participation in the Case Study

Table 2 illustrates participation in data collection activities, showing the number of participants in each category across all four schools.

Table 2: Participation in Data Collection activities

Activity	Number of Participants			
	Parkrose	Rainier	Forest Grove	Sutherlin
Parent focus group	5	2	6	10
Students w/o ID interview/survey	2	10	10	7
Principal/Asst. Prin. interview	1	1	1	1
Site liaison/Spec. Ed. Teacher interviews	1	2	2	2
Students with ID survey	13	11	15	9
Total interview/survey participation	22	26	34	29

Project UNIFY History

Point of Entry

Project UNIFY appears to spread by simple outreach to staff who are aware of the needs of students with ID. Though each school has a slightly different story of how the program was initiated, in each case there seems to be a staff member who came into contact with Special Olympics Oregon/Project UNIFY through outreach. In the case of Parkrose, Project UNIFY staff had contacted the school to request use

of a school field for a Unified Sports Training. This led to discussions about the potential for the program at Parkrose that intrigued the school’s Transitions Coordinator.

Staff at Rainier and Forest Grove attended different events (a professional development conference and a Special Olympics Oregon rally) that introduced them to the program, which piqued their interest regarding how the program might benefit their student population. Sutherlin’s Health/PE teacher had Special Olympics Oregon/Project UNIFY involvement in a previous professional position and brought the knowledge and programmatic relationships with her to her new role at Sutherlin. The basic ingredients of how Project UNIFY spread seem to be getting the word out about the program to school level staff involved with students with ID.

Forest Grove and Sutherlin have been operating Project UNIFY the longest, four years each, and Parkrose and Rainier have been operating the program a little less at three and two years respectively. See Table 3.

Table 3: Project UNIFY Implementation Overview

	Parkrose	Rainier	Forest Grove	Sutherlin
Project UNIFY Onset School Year	2009–10	2010–11	2008–09	2008–09
Number of Years Operating	3	2	4	4
1st Project UNIFY Activity	Unified Kickball	Partner’s Club	Unified Basketball	Partner’s Club
Total # of Activities	21	10	38	54

Student Participation

Project UNIFY offers a menu of program activity types-sports, leadership, rallies, etc.—allowing schools to implement those activities believed will best serve their student population. It turns out it’s a good thing to offer this range of activities as each school’s student population showed the differences in their preferences with their attendance and votes for favorites (see Table 4).

Parkrose showed its clear preference for athletic activities since its three top attended activities and three surveyed favorites were all sporting events. Sutherlin also had a preference for sport activities as demonstrated by Unified Basketball being strongly attended and ranking as a favorite activity along with Unified Softball. Sutherlin balances its interest in athletics with its appreciation for Partners Club, its most preferred activity as demonstrated by it being the best attended as well as being chosen as the top favorite activity among surveyed students with ID.

Table 4: Best Attended and Favorite Activities

	Top 3 Attended	Top 3 Favorites
Parkrose (N = 12)	School Sports Assembly: 50%	School Sports Assembly: 50%
	Unified Basketball: 34 %	Unified Basketball: 17%
	Halftime Exhibition @ Trailblazers Game: 25%	Halftime Exhibition @ Trailblazers Game: 17%
	Youth Games: 25%	
Rainier (N = 11)	Lunch Bunch: 73%	Unified PE: 55%
	Unified PE: 64%	R-Word Campaign: 27%
	R-Word Campaign: 64%	Spread the Word to End the Word: 27%
Forest Grove (N = 15)	R-Word Assembly: 87%	R-Word Assembly: 60%
	Partners Club: 74%	Unified Basketball: 60%
	Youth Leadership Summit at Nike: 74%	Partners Club: 54%
Sutherlin (N = 9)	Partners Club: 89%	Partners Club: 89%
	Unified Basketball: 89%	Unified Basketball: 78%
		Unified Softball: 78%
		Youth Leadership Summit at Nike: 78%
	Youth Rally: 78%	

Partners Club was among the best attended and favorite activities at Forest Grove as well. As part of Partners Club, students at Forest Grove meet on a weekly basis to participate in a range of activities like movie nights, autism walks, Homecoming float building, and Pledge and Plunge. However, Forest Grove’s best attended and top favorite activity was the R-Word Campaign. The R-Word Campaign assemblies (which were among the favorites at Rainier as well) gave students with and without ID an opportunity to be involved with planning and presenting on a topic of importance to crowds of elementary and high school students as large as 800.

Program Implementation

Implementing Project UNIFY at a school requires the completion of a similar set of tasks no matter the site of implementation, including: administrative tasks like paperwork, securing funding, and interacting with Project UNIFY staff; coordination of student involvement, both students with and without ID; coordination of activities, both athletic and not. Decisions about how these tasks are divided and among which people are made at the site level, leaving room for different models of implementation.

Parkrose approached implementation with one site liaison, a long-standing staff member known as the Transitions Coordinator. With the approval of the principal as needed, the site liaison oversees all of the coordination of activities at the school level and with Project UNIFY staff. Her major assistance comes from student volunteers. Their importance is noted in the site liaison’s sharing that it is hard not to have

the benefit of increasingly experienced second- and third-year volunteers. These volunteers are often seniors who are not available to participate after graduating. Together, this implementation approach averaged seven activities per year for over 1,000 students for the past three years.

On the other end of the spectrum, Rainier divides its work among four, mostly new-to-Rainier staff with a new and supportive principal. The Special Education Director serves as the site liaison and manages the administrative aspects (i.e., works with Project UNIFY staff, completes paperwork, identifies funding sources, gains insights at conferences) of program implementation. The school counselor works with a student leadership team to implement activities and a Special Education teacher supports the involvement of students with ID in program activities. The PE teacher implements Unified PE (in which students with and without ID have class together) and coordinates all of the Unified Sports activities. (Prior to Project UNIFY students with ID at Rainier only had separate adaptive PE classes available to them.) Together, this system of implementation averaged five activities per year for almost 500 students for the past two years.

Forest Grove implements Project UNIFY for a large student body with two site liaisons: a Special Education teacher and a Special Education teacher/Department Head. The Special Education teacher, while two years new at Forest Grove, has been coordinating Unified Sports activities for the past four years; she started at her previous school. The Special Education Teacher/Department Head has been at Forest Grove for six years and has been the students' advisor for the Partners Club for the past four years while also coordinating all other aspects of Project UNIFY.

Similar to Forest Grove, but for a much smaller student body, Sutherlin also implemented Project UNIFY with two staff. The Health and PE teacher serves as the site liaison, managing Project UNIFY paperwork, coadvising the Partners Club and coordinating Unified Sports activities. The other coadvisor for the Partners Club is a Special Education teacher who also works to integrate students with ID and their families with the program and the community as a whole. The students in the Partners Club serve as the gateway to all Project UNIFY activities.

Impact

This case study project sought to address the following key research question:

What impact has Project UNIFY had on students with intellectual disabilities?

To understand impact, we defined what behaviors, attitudes, and/or actions reflect impact. These were defined by Project UNIFY staff in three areas: social interactions, school inclusion, and progress toward overall Project goal.

The following section provides definitions for these areas, as well as data that illustrate what has occurred within each area.

Social Interactions

Project UNIFY activities will encourage social interactions between students with and without ID. This is defined as:

Increased time spent together such as eating lunch together, identifying each other as friends, examples cited of displaying friendship behaviors such as saying “hi” in the hallways.

Participating in Project UNIFY activities are a source of interactions between students with and without ID in addition to interactions that may (or may not) have already been occurring, but what about interactions in addition to that? (See Table 5.) Many of the surveyed students with ID are able to point to interactions with students without ID that they have had outside of specific program activities. The most frequently cited way of interacting at Rainier, Forest Grove, and Sutherlin was to have lunch together; Parkrose students with ID reported their most frequently cited interaction as talking on the phone with students without ID.

Table 5: Social Interactions Since Project UNIFY—Athlete Survey Results

	Parkrose N=12	Rainier N=11	Forest Grove N=15	Sutherlin N=9
Eat lunch together	38%	64%	54%	78%
Talk on the phone	50%	0%	0%	22%
Study together	0%	0%	14%	22%
Go out to a movie	13%	9%	27%	22%
Other	13%	0%	40%	22%

In addition to interacting outside of program activities, many students with ID at each school also believe students without ID spend more time with them. With the exception of Parkrose, each of the school’s students with ID report experiencing this increased time together since participating in the program (see Table 6). Approximately 50 % of students with ID at Rainier (45%) and Forest Grove (54%) report that they now spend more time with students without ID and a full 67% of Sutherlin students with ID report the same. This study did not explore why some students (as many as 42% of Parkrose students with ID) believe students without ID now spend less time with them than before program participation, so this may be another area for future study.

Table 6: Time Spent Together—Athlete Survey Results

	Parkrose N=12	Rainier N=11	Forest Grove N=15	Sutherlin N=9
More	9%	45%	54%	67%
Same	50%	27%	20%	33%
Less	42%	27%	14%	0%

Student, staff, and parents of students with ID surveys and interviews yielded many statements indicating an increase in social interactions; here is just a sample:

- “I feel that before Project UNIFY many students with disabilities (for the most part) were ignored and/or overlooked. But with it [UNIFY] there are many opportunities for interaction and many friendships formed that wouldn’t be there otherwise.”
—*Sutherlin student without ID*
- “Since I’ve joined Project UNIFY, I have developed friendships with students with ID and without disabilities. I now see them in the halls at school and can say hi and interact with them at lunches, and school events.”
—*Forest Grove student without ID*
- “Through UNIFY, students with and without ID are in clubs and sports together. There’s been more true friendships rather than ‘oh yeah, that kid with ID in my class.’”
—*Forest Grove staff member*

School Inclusion

Students with ID will be included in the school community. This is defined as:

Students with ID being a part of school committees, clubs, student government, student council, and/or other school related activities. It also includes students with ID attending school events such as dances.

Three of the schools have students with ID reporting small to modest increases in their participation in student committees or afterschool clubs, namely, Rainier (6%), Parkrose (25%) and Sutherlin (44%) (see Table 7). Forest Grove students with ID reported a more substantial 67% increase in this area. Also considered indicative of school inclusion is spending more time with Partners (students without ID). In this category, better than half of students with ID at three schools (Rainier, Forest Grove and Sutherlin) reported spending more time with partners (students without ID) while only 9% reported the same at Parkrose.

Table 7: School Inclusion Since Project UNIFY: Athlete Survey Results

	Parkrose N=12	Rainier N=11	Forest Grove N=15	Sutherlin N=9
Attend student committees/afterschool clubs	25%	6%	67%	44%
More time with Partners	9%	45%	54%	67%

While students with ID’s participation in school committees and clubs other than Project UNIFY activities is modest, their sense of school inclusion is much stronger overall (see Table 8). Over a third of students with ID at Rainier, over half at Forest Grove, and a substantial 78% at Sutherlin report a sense of being more a part of their school since participating in Project UNIFY. Parkrose is an outlier with only 9% of surveyed students with ID reporting an increased feeling of being a part of their school.

Table 8: Sense of School Inclusion

	Parkrose N=12	Rainier N=11	Forest Grove N=15	Sutherlin N=9
More	9%	36%	54%	78%
Same	50%	45%	34%	11%
Less	42%	9%	13%	11%

Here is a sample of some of the things students, staff, and parents of students with ID shared in surveys and interviews indicating an increase in school inclusion since participation in Project UNIFY:

- “Project UNIFY has made other students far more accepting and less afraid to work with my daughter. Other students are far more willing to make sure she has a significant role in every play the drama club puts on. The other kids treat her just like everyone else.”
—*Sutherlin parent*

“Project UNIFY has gotten everyone involved. Not nearly as many outlets for students if we didn’t have UNIFY.”
—*Forest Grove student*
- “They believe in themselves and have friends outside of Partners Club, so they are more able to go for those clubs.”
—*Sutherlin student without ID*

Overall Project Goal

Students with ID are treated with dignity, respect, and acceptance.

Specific examples of being treated with dignity, respect, and acceptance were provided by students, staff, parents, and/or administrators during interviews. Each school had numerous stories to share, including: a Parkrose student with ID received a standing ovation after singing in the school talent show; a Rainier student with ID was named Winter Ball Queen alongside a student without ID who was a football player; students with ID at Forest Grove performed with students without ID in a school-wide performance of a play on bullying; and after the R-Word campaign at Sutherlin many students without ID and teachers reportedly shared having a new understanding of why inclusion is so important.

Additional supporting statements provided during interviews and surveys on how students with ID are treated with dignity, respect, and acceptance include:

- “Example: walking into school one day, a student athlete was conversing with friends. But when he saw our daughter (with ID), he broke from his conversation with his friends and made a concerted effort to greet her and ask how she was doing.”
—*Rainier parent*
- “We see people who have not had experiences with someone with ID change because of the activities that Project UNIFY offered. Coming from a school district that is not involved with Project UNIFY, the awareness, friendship, opportunities that are offered here is drastically different.”
—*Sutherlin parent*
- “UNIFY has opened up the eyes of everyone to WANT to show respect, dignity, and advocate for what they believe is right.”
—*Rainier Student*
- “I think general education students have shown more respect for students with disabilities. They don’t use the R-word. They are empowering themselves and empowering Special Education students to advocate.”
—*Parkrose staff member*
- “I think one major way our school shows respect is that I personally rarely if ever hear the R-word. People here are respectful enough to understand that we are all equal and derogatory terms are unacceptable.”
—*Forest Grove student*

- “Project UNIFY is the reason we are such an inclusive school. It has given us so many opportunities to learn what life is actually about.”
—*Forest Grove student*

Unexpected Outcomes

Programs like Project UNIFY are usually implemented with specific outcomes in mind, but sometimes there are additional effects. Two schools experienced some positive unexpected outcomes. Parents of students with ID at Forest Grove reported that Project UNIFY gave them much-needed opportunities to connect with other parents, thereby increasing their own social interactions. These interactions occurred with parents of students with and without ID and served to increase these parents’ support systems. Another unexpected outcome at Forest Grove was the goal-supporting content of the Unified Theater production, “Marked.” Written by a Forest Grove instructional assistant, the theme of the play “Marked” was bullying, and its value in supporting the Project UNIFY goal of students with ID being treated with dignity, respect, and acceptance came up repeatedly during interviews.

Similarly, staff at Rainier report that Project UNIFY inspired the implementation of a whole new program at the school titled “Exceptional Child.” The program aims to address issues of social justice by providing students without ID the opportunity to earn credit assisting a student with ID with reading, learning, and overall peer support. Submission of a social justice project demonstrating an understanding of disability rights is part of the graded work. It may prove interesting to see what future impacts this program may have on the school community.

Best Practices and Elements of Success

Best practices, by definition, are those elements that are repeatedly involved with good results. There are two elements that all of the studied Project UNIFY school sites had in common; they:

1. Creatively engaged students without ID
2. Had supportive school leadership

Each school site had its own way of going about it, but each site found ways of identifying and securing the involvement of students without ID. Parkrose solicited the involvement of a large, well-established student group (Students who Want to Achieve Greatness [SWAG]) mid-project that went on to successfully support and coordinate future project activities, contributing to considerable buy-in of

students without ID. Rainier had a school counselor—described as the “vortex”—who worked to involve the student leadership team of nearly 35 students in activity implementation. Forest Grove students without ID participating in the Partners Club are involved in planning, coordinating, or leading Project UNIFY activities. Some students use this involvement to serve as their senior project (for example, one student planned the Unified Softball tournament as her senior project). At Sutherlin, ten pairs of students with and without ID are elected to share leadership positions involved in participating, planning, coordinating, and leading Project UNIFY activities. This group makes up the core of the Partners Club, considered to be the gateway to all Project UNIFY activities.

In addition to creatively engaging students without ID, each school described having supportive school leadership. It didn’t matter whether the school’s administrative leaders were new to the school (Rainier’s principal) or of longer standing (Forest Grove’s principal and Sutherlin’s assistant principal); this support was noted as valuable at each of the schools. While not intended to require large efforts on the part of school leadership, principals and/or assistant principals are reported to have roles in authorizing activities, securing funding, logistics planning (i.e., transportation, school-wide scheduling) and encouraging student participation in program activities.

Another element common to three of the schools is an implementation design involving shared leadership. Rainier divided programmatic roles among four staff, and Forest Grove and Sutherlin both have two staff dedicated to implementing the program. Again, each school had its own way of dividing up the tasks, but the sharing of labor may be relevant to success.

Two other schools (Rainier and Forest Grove) had another element in common that might be worth spreading. They were each open to additional programming that may prove to be synergistic with the intended impacts of Project UNIFY. Building on the R-Word Campaign, Rainier implemented its social justice program, “Exceptional Child,” and Forest Grove had a school-wide performance of “Marked,” a play addressing social justice issues (bullying).

There were a few other elements that, while not noted to be common to other schools, were thought to be important to the success at their respective schools. Forest Grove’s existing efforts and policies in support of inclusiveness are believed to have made it easier to implement Project UNIFY activities, as buy-in was already established. Similarly, staff at Sutherlin believed the experience and dedication to inclusion of the site liaisons made for the successful implementation of Project UNIFY at their school.

Challenges/Areas for Improvement

A major value add of program evaluation is learning: that is, learning what worked and what did not. In this way, organizations have the information they need to make decisions about what efforts to repeat, tweak, or drop. The issues that Project UNIFY school sites reported as challenging or in need of improvement fell into four main categories: students; logistics; communications; program.

Student Issues

- Many of Parkrose’s student coordinators were seniors and, as such, the program lost the benefit of their experience each year that the senior student coordinators graduated.
- Staff at Sutherlin would like to see their students build their own leadership skills so that they can be less dependent on the leadership of staff.

Logistical Issues

- Both Parkrose and Sutherlin reported having issues with transportation. Both schools benefitted from Special Olympics Oregon’s funding assistance, which resolved the lack of access to activities experienced by both schools.
- Currently the Parkrose athletic department has sole use of the school gym during after-school hours, requiring that Project UNIFY activities find space across the street at the middle school. Parkrose may need to resolve concerns about unequal access that this arrangement created.

Communication Issues

- Parkrose reported that Special Olympics Oregon’s paperwork and staff communications were unnecessarily challenging or excessive. Student participation in some activities required the completion of several forms per student and communications with several staff across more than one Special Olympics Oregon program (Project UNIFY, Unified Sports).
- Forest Grove, although they really had to reach to identify an area in need of improvement, suggested that it may be helpful to create some type of communication vehicle regarding Project UNIFY for families of students with ID.

Programmatic Issues

- Rainier staff’s sole suggestion for improvement was to balance Project UNIFY’s focus on sports with social justice opportunities, possibly through the use of the Special Olympics Get into It curriculum.
- Forest Grove noted that recruiting staff volunteers is difficult, and that having a paid staff person for Project UNIFY responsibilities would be helpful.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made in light of data from staff, student, and parent surveys and interviews, on-site visits and direct observations, and other data collection efforts:

- Enlist student coordinator volunteers who are younger than the senior grade level (in addition to seniors) to increase the likelihood of benefitting from their experience for a second or third year in a row.
- Solicit the involvement of large, well-established non-ID student groups early in the project that may be able to take a lead role in supporting and coordinating project activities.
- Identify someone (student leaders, Project UNIFY coordinator) to meet with the coordinators of student clubs, committees, or planning teams to identify ways that students with ID might be able to participate in those activities.
- Coordinate with school communications managers to ensure that Project UNIFY events get equal billing in school communications (i.e., calendars, newsletters, bulletin boards) and to identify a way to get Project UNIFY communications to parents of students with ID.
- Consider hosting leadership training workshops for students to increase their leadership skills, thus supporting them in taking the lead in Project UNIFY activities.
- Given the understood transportation needs common to many school communities, Special Olympics Oregon could codify their travel assistance so that schools know how to access it up front.

In summary, this case study project revealed deep insights into program impact and implementation. Data suggest students with ID are more included in their school communities, have more social interactions with students without ID, and overall are more accepted in the school. Though implementation can vary from school to school, there was consistent evidence that there was a positive impact at each school. Project UNIFY inspired students, staff, and parents to shift their school culture from one of isolation to acceptance. These activities empower students without ID to be change advocates for students with ID to be a part of the school, and ultimately to make progress toward the program goal of “promoting dignity, respect, and acceptance for people with intellectual disabilities.”