

**SPECIAL OLYMPICS PROJECT UNIFY
YEAR ONE**

**Results from
2008-09 NATIONAL YOUTH ACTIVATION DEMONSTRATION PROGRAM**

A Final Report to the U.S. Department of Education
Office of Special Education Programs

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is undertaken in response to an award from the U.S. Department of Education to Special Olympics International (SOI) under authorities of the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Special Olympics Sport and Empowerment Act. The project focused on one central area of activity: Project UNIFY, a National Youth Activation Demonstration program inaugurated under U.S. Department of Education funding in June 2008, which brings youth with and without intellectual disabilities (ID) together through sports and related activities providing them with the knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to create school communities of welcome for persons with ID.

Current Special Olympics (SO) programming focuses on inclusion by using sports as the platform for student awareness, understanding and engagement, and where SO initiatives serve as vehicles for bringing young people together in meaningful ways. There is strong evidence that SO sports and related programs provide platforms for youth to understand and value their peers with ID, and empower and activate youth to create opportunities for and with them in sport, friendship, leadership, team building and advocacy (Norins, Harada & Brecklinghaus, 2007). Through Project UNIFY educators and school communities are provided the opportunity to witness firsthand the value of Special Olympics in helping schools reach the mutually held goal of sustaining quality inclusive strategies in schools that support academic, civic, and social skills and of all students. Special Olympics is in a unique position to effect change in school climates by organizing school-based programs that offer a coordinated set of activities that effectively and efficiently engage and motivate students.

Project UNIFY's stated purpose is to activate youth to develop school communities where all young people are agents of change - fostering respect, dignity and advocacy for people with intellectual disabilities (ID) by utilizing the existing initiatives of Special Olympics, as well as new, student-led initiatives. Its ultimate goal is to create a climate of social inclusion (not merely physical inclusion) found to be so beneficial to all students. The success of Special Olympics Project UNIFY is based primarily on the achievements of all youth, particularly students with ID, who, in many cases, are typically disengaged from many school-based opportunities to learn and serve. Project UNIFY is an aggressive and broad strategy for engagement between

SO and the U.S. educational community from the national to the state and local school levels. The program builds upon existing partnerships and initiates new partnerships.

During our first year of Project UNIFY, we identified many key factors that we believe are predictive of success in schools. Preliminary evidence supports the notion that Special Olympics Project UNIFY programs have the potential to influence and impact youth and the schools they attend. As we embark on year two of Project UNIFY we are using what was learned from year 1 to further broaden the opportunities for sharing among various constituents by continuing to build the infrastructure and collaborations that ensure the sustainability of our work and ultimately, to build upon the interest generated among students, teachers, parents and school administrators. The results of SO's work and initial evidence in its first year of Project UNIFY are promising, and there has been much demand and enthusiasm generated, not only in the U.S., but in other parts of the world where these practices are seen as bell weathers to a more civil society for all.

...“The ultimate goal of Special Olympics is to help persons with Intellectual Disabilities participate as productive and respected members of society at large by offering them a fair opportunity to develop and demonstrate their skills and talents through sports training and competition, and by increasing the public's awareness of their capabilities and needs.”

- The Special Olympics General Rules

I. Special Olympics Project UNIFY Description

Special Olympics Project UNIFY was developed as a strategy for engaging schools to use the tools and sports programs of SO to create school climates of inclusion, acceptance, respect and human dignity for all students with and without ID, building on SO values, principles, practices, experiences and impacts.

Project UNIFY was designed to give students with and without ID opportunities for engagement together as athletes, teammates, and peers. Specifically, for students with ID, emphasis is placed on sport and non-sport skills and sense of self. For students without ID, emphasis was also placed on skills, as well as their knowledge and perceptions of ID. Through Project UNIFY, youth were to be educated, motivated and activated to gain knowledge, develop better attitudes and demonstrate a real commitment for working on behalf of people with ID. Structured educational and sports opportunities would create the platform for increasing students' skills and knowledge, as well as the formation of positive social relationships. Schools were essential to this process as the setting where youth spend so much time interacting in a variety of different situations and social contexts.

Distinctive Project UNIFY characteristics were identified:

- Youth Leadership
- School/Community Collaborations
- Communications
- Professional Development
- Unifying Programming
- Creating and Sustaining Relationships
- Continuous Improvement

Special Olympics initiatives, or the tools of Project UNIFY, include a variety of educational and social integration models that have proven effective through decades of SO sports programming and related initiatives, and which incorporate these Project UNIFY characteristics. It was the “unification” of these programs in purposeful combinations that was at the crux of the Project UNIFY model. Traditional and Unified Sports experiences, in combination with other non-sport activities, such as school assemblies, partners clubs or R-word

campaigns would be the optimum combination. Ultimately, we were seeking to make impressions regarding individual knowledge and attitudes through the one-on-one interaction provided by sports activities, and deepening that one-on-one impression through collective experiences with the larger group activities. These programs included:

- **Unified Sports®**, a program that places athletes with ID and “partners” (athletes without ID) on the same team to compete in team sports.
- **SO Get Into It® (SOGII)**, a curriculum to help students understand, accept and celebrate individual differences;
- **Young Athletes™**, a program designed to engage young children (2½ - 7 years old) with ID through developmentally appropriate play activities;
- **Camp Shriver**, a recreational summer program that uses sports to bring children and young adults with and without ID together to interact, learn, and play with one another as equals;
- **Athlete Leadership Programs (ALPS)** to foster and support the development of leadership skills in individuals with ID as a way to build self-confidence;
- **Youth Rallies and Youth Forums and Assemblies**, where young people educate each other on issues, motivate each other and activate on a set of agreed upon engagement practices;
- **The R-Word Campaign**, a prescribed set of resources and tools to help students eradicate the hurtful and harmful use of language to demean and diminish;
- **Fans in the Stands**, a way for students of all ages to engage with persons with ID when direct interaction is not possible, by supporting SO athletes at events; and,
- **Fan Community**, participation in the SO social network, or on-line Fan Community, which allows members to share stories, ideas, photos and videos.

Local school- based projects that met Project UNIFY objectives were supported through a sub-grant process for state SO Programs utilizing funds from this grant. While the sub-award process was conducted as a competitive grant process, efforts were made to work with each interested state SO Program to assist them in meeting the Project UNIFY criteria, with the expectation that, as a demonstration project, we would gain the broadest knowledge from engaging with the largest possible number of project executions. Programs were

instructed to use the above list of programming as a starting point for their projects, and asked to utilize sports and non-sports activities in combinations that best complemented the Program's existing strategic goals and the needs and objectives of the school systems with whom they were going to collaborate.

Not all SO Programs had the same level of relationships with schools and often, collaborative partnerships needed to be established before Project UNIFY could be implemented. Therefore, we expected a continuum of engagement, where those SO Programs with existing partnerships with schools would be able to implement more complex and comprehensive Project UNIFY designs than those Programs that were initiating new collaborations. We hoped that the broad nature of Project UNIFY and the latitude given to state SO Programs to design their own specific project would allow for flexibility in implementation, yet still allow for across-the-board evaluation and comparisons. We made every effort to ensure SO Programs held fidelity to the Project UNIFY principles by creating and disseminating guidelines that communicated the key characteristics of effective practice as well as by providing ongoing technical assistance and support.

In summary, Project UNIFY sought to build upon existing relationships and commitments to provide quality opportunities for youth with and without intellectual disabilities to contribute their fullest to society. It has not been simply another initiative; it has become a *new way of doing business*. It focuses on youth as leaders and major contributors to project design, implementation, evaluation and sustainability. We expect that as youth co-create projects focused on advocating for youth as *change agents*, they will begin to acquire the knowledge, confidence and skills necessary to be effective champions of social justice.

II. Project Activities

Data on Schools and Participants

Because of the nature of Project UNIFY and the differences with regard to not only the types of SO initiatives implemented across schools, the number of activities implemented, and the frequency with which they were implemented, there was great variability in the participation rates of students with and without intellectual disabilities in Project UNIFY activities. As might be expected, given that each school enrolls a limited number of students with intellectual disabilities, the greatest variability in participation across schools was found among students without intellectual disabilities. For some students participation meant ongoing

involvement over time, and for others it represented attendance at a single event (e.g. a school-wide assembly).

[Note: The varying levels of participation are further addressed in the Evaluation Report.]

The data gathered from the Project UNIFY state Program sub-award reports reflects this varying degree of participation and as such, it is hard to differentiate, and/or make comparisons across all states. This is in part a result of overlap in activity by some students, and because there were different interpretations of “exposure.” For example, the number of students without ID reported as participating in Project UNIFY across the states included all students who were involved in any school-wide Project UNIFY activities, including those who may have seen a PSA, or been exposed to school announcements or other forms of awareness. However this number also includes those students without ID who participated in Project UNIFY in a more intense manner; for example, those students without ID that participated in Unified Sports, Partners Clubs or on committees devoted to conducting Project UNIFY activities at the school. This type of involvement was much more intense and these students were likely participating on a much more personal level than simply attending a school-wide assembly. While we do not have data on the numbers of teachers engaged from every state, the number of participating teachers reported by 13 state Programs was more than 4,200, reflecting on average a broad-based or school-wide engagement. Very few Programs included numbers for families, so this is a number that will inevitably increase in future as we track more consistently.

Table 1: Numbers of Participants Collected from State SO Program Project UNIFY Final Reports

Schools	Special Olympics Athletes	Unified Partners	Non ID Students	Exposed to Project UNIFY	Families
1,779	3,318	7,604	43,022	626,306	1,247

Note: There will be instances in this report where numbers may not align perfectly with numbers in the Project UNIFY Evaluation Report. (See Addendum.) This is because the Evaluation Report surveys were filled out by a sub-sample of the entire project participation.

Technical Assistance and Project Management

During the first year of the project there was a full time staff of five persons as well as the services of one consultant devoted to the execution of the goals and objectives set forth in the original Project UNIFY

proposal. This group of core staff was responsible for the creation and dissemination of all materials and resources to internal and external constituents, including project descriptions, business, marketing and operation plans, promotional materials, reports, evaluation and administrative procedures. The team developed a set of criteria, review process and dissemination plan for \$2,400,000.00 in sub-awards to 39 state SO Programs, which included collecting and reviewing programmatic and financial reports. Technical assistance was provided in the form of weekly individual calls to project managers in each of the 39 state SO Programs participating in Project UNIFY, as well as monthly and quarterly technical assistance conference calls. In addition, 44 site visits were conducted over the course of 8 months to the state SO Programs and participating schools. Leadership groups (defined in detail below) were also formed involving nomination and selection processes to provide advisory support from youth leadership, education leadership, and practitioners. These groups were supported by the core staff team with regular face-to-face and virtual communications and interactions.

This core staff group and leadership groups were involved in reaching out, delivering presentations and exposing the Project UNIFY principles and practices to organizations interested in the project objectives. Partnerships were either initiated or developed with America's Promise Alliance, the Association of American School Administrators, the National Middle School Association, the National Association of School Boards, Learning for Life, the Lions Clubs International/Leos Clubs, and SEANet, the State Education Agency K-12 Service-Learning Network. In addition, and because an attempt was made to integrate the work of Project UNIFY throughout Special Olympics Inc., an SO based team of staff from other departments were involved in the various pertinent activities such as web design and development, communications and public relations, special events, curriculum and training development, marketing and fundraising, and finance.

While overseeing the operations and execution of the local Project UNIFY projects across the 39 state SO Programs, the core team also designed and executed three major events. The first two, The Global Youth Activation Summit, and the Youth Rally, were held in February 2009 in conjunction with the 2009 Special Olympics World Winter Games. A nomination process was used to recruit the 150 youth participants from 21 countries that attended the summit. The Youth Rally was attended by 2,500 young people from more than 200 local Boise area schools. The third event was a full 3-day conference attended by 175 Special Olympics athletes, youth partners, and Program leaders representing 42 U.S. states.

Project UNIFY Year 1 Highlights

In the first year of Project UNIFY, SO state Programs were given latitude to design Project UNIFY programs that fit the unique needs of their state, their school districts, the individual schools, and also took into account the existing level of interaction and collaboration between the SO Program and schools. While there was some similarity across the different state Programs, there were also major differences in design, execution and focus. While this made comparing, categorizing and summarizing results challenging, it also provided a rich tapestry of examples and activities. There were many instances of creativity and success that are worth sharing and from which future expansions and enhancements can be derived. Please see the attached “Snapshots of Successful Strategies and Impact” (See Addendum) for an array of unique approaches, examples of creativity, and early anecdotal evidence of impact.

A more detailed account of the actual numbers of schools, participants and other relevant data can be found in the U.S. Department of Education Form 524B. However the following bullets are provided as a summary of this more detailed information and to highlight some of the Project UNIFY activities.

Project UNIFY School Projects

- \$2.3M in Project UNIFY funds were distributed to 39 state SO Programs in the US to implement Project UNIFY programs;
- In Year 1 Project UNIFY was implemented in 39 states and involved 1,700 schools. In many of these schools students were actively involved in the planning and implementation of Project UNIFY, demonstrating that it is possible to include young people in creating communities of understanding and acceptance;
- 43,000 young people participated in projects, including 11,000 new Special Olympics athletes;
- 600,000 youth were reported to have been exposed to Project UNIFY activities and messaging
- 4,000 teachers were reported to have been involved
- 1,200 family members were reported to have been involved

Youth and Education Leadership

- The Youth Activation Committee formed as part of Project UNIFY was comprised of 16 youth leaders who worked to help guide and advise Project UNIFY;
- The Youth Activation Committee took part in the 2008 Global Education Summit on Inclusive Practices in Schools, hosted by the U.S. Department of Education in Washington, DC;
- Project UNIFY Youth Activation Committee members and youth interns/designed and developed session content and facilitated all sessions at a culminating Bridge Meeting held in August, 2009. Youth leaders also supported and managed logistical elements of the meeting for 180 SO Program leaders and young people with and without ID from 42 states;
- Project UNIFY Youth Activation Committee members from Virginia and Indiana joined over 150 young leaders from across the nation in Washington, DC in June 2009 for the first annual Impact Academy for Community Engagement, hosted by America's Promise Alliance to discuss the issues that our nation's young people face, and their possible solutions;
- A National Education Practitioners Group was created, as well as a National Education Leaders Network, which included some of the leading voices in education, service learning, school climate and character education (See addendum for list of members and affiliations.);
- National education leaders and youth development professionals, such as William Hughes, Superintendent of Schools in Greendale, WI, and leader in the American Association of School Administrators(AASA); Anderson Williams, from The Oasis Center; and Teri Dary, co-chair of State Education Agency K-12 Service-Learning Network (SEANet); to provide insights, technical assistance and professional development as well as develop tangible materials, resources and products;
- Youth Activation Committee members from Virginia and Indiana joined over 150 young leaders from across the nation in Washington, DC in June 2009 for the first annual Impact Academy for Community Engagement, hosted by America's Promise Alliance to discuss the issues that our nation's young people face, and their possible solutions;
- Six Special Olympics Project UNIFY youth leaders with and without ID from Lebanon, Kansas and New York took part in the 6th Annual United Nations Youth Assembly held at the UN Headquarters in New York City in August, 2009. Their role at this global youth gathering was to be the messengers about Project UNIFY and its overall vision of educating, motivating and activating young people around the world
- Youth Activation Committee members and youth interns/designed and developed session content and facilitated all sessions at a culminating Bridge Meeting held in August, 2009. Youth leaders also supported and managed logistical elements of the meeting for 180 SO Program leaders and young people with and without ID from 42 states; and
- Small Sub-Grants were awarded to youth on a competitive basis to allow for the development of youth-conceived, created and executed projects to further the goals of Project UNIFY in their schools and communities.

Global Youth Activation Summit (GYAS)

- 150 young people aged 14-20 with and without intellectual disabilities representing 21 countries convened in Boise, Idaho at the 2009 Special Olympics World Winter Games and made a commitment to making a difference in their schools and communities through Special Olympics;

- The week long summit, was planned and organized by youth, and was comprised of sessions on topical issues concerning advocacy for persons with ID, journalism and leadership training, and interactive sports experiences;
- The summit agenda included an Assembly of Delegates using parliamentary process, deliberating, discussing and voting on a series of motions for policy and practice affecting the lives of youth with and without intellectual disabilities.

Global Youth Rally

- 2,500 youth with and without intellectual disabilities gathered for an inspiring and motivational event that launched a global movement to champion a world of acceptance and welcome for all people, held as part of 2009 World Winter Games in Boise, Idaho and webcast globally via live streaming video and resulting in 5685 web site visits and 14,261 page views for the day;
- Celebrity supporters joined the two-hour interactive rally to show their support for tolerance and acceptance.

Communications and Awareness

- Launched Web-based networking and social communications platform on the Special Olympics website resulting in 7,400 new members on the Special Olympics Fan Community - 2,000 of them active;
- Created Special Olympics communities on other social networking sites such as Facebook, with 41,495 fans, the YouTube SO Channel, with 72,127 views, and Twitter with 1,500 followers, virtually engaging thousands of users in the cause of social justice for people with intellectual disabilities.
- Among many notable local media stories, also secured mention of the “R-Word” and the youth-driven campaign on the “O’Reilly Factor” on *Fox News Channel*.

Spread the Word to End the Word 03.31.09 (not in original scope of work)

- Youth generated, youth led campaign of activation resulting from Global Youth Rally and Global Youth Activation Summit;
- Nation-wide campaign implemented in high schools, universities, and throughout local communities for one day asking every young person to help lead an effort to eliminate demeaning uses of the r-word (retard);
- More than 700 schools and colleges conducted a Spread the Word to End the Word day;
- 30,000 people, mostly students, visited the web site, www.r-word.org and signed the pledge.

► **Impact: Social Justice Given School Tradition Status**

The 3.31.09 Spread the Word to End the Word Campaign was presented to the Cactus Shadows High School Student Government about one week before the event was set to take place. As soon as they realized the social impact and importance of the r-word in their school culture, they took action! These youth leaders built excitement for the day by convincing all their teachers and school/district administration to support the event by wearing the t-shirt. The group got the word out on Facebook to fellow students and shared Soeren Palumbo’s R-Word Speech. One student even wore her shirt the weekend before 3.31.09 to a state student government event and discussed the r-word campaign.

On the day of the event, the student government's youth creativity really came out. They created four large banners which read: "the r-word stops here". They had over 500 students sign these as their pledge to stop using the work. Three members appeared on the morning announcements discussing the importance of the topic and how they felt about the r-word. These students encouraged others to take the pledge or at least check out www.r-word.org during their "pledging blitz" in the library throughout the day. A tradition at Cactus Shadows is painting the very large "spirit rock" to promote big events such as homecoming. Before the lunch passing outside, they painted the large rock in blue and white with "Spread the Word to End the Word" and r-word.org!

- *Submitted by Special Olympics Arizona*

Youth Leadership

- Eight young people, with and without intellectual disabilities, joined the Project UNIFY team and completed summer internships providing them opportunities in leadership, investigation and professional development.
- Project UNIFY interns supported the work of Project UNIFY and the Special Olympics movement by creating materials, developing programs and processes, contributing to communications and marketing efforts and making presentations to a variety of internal and external audiences.

Curriculum

- The Special Olympics Get Into It Curriculum (SOGII) was reviewed for an entire overhaul, with youth leaders, school practitioners and educators, as well as SO Program leaders, engaged in a thorough appraisal;
- Recommendations for a new, inclusive, interactive and fully integrated K-12 curriculum, aligned with state standards, and service learning were incorporated in to a request for proposal process, resulting in a contract for the curriculum rewrite, which is ongoing and to be completed in 2010.

Global Scope *(not in original scope of work)*

- Interest from other regions regarding potential for pilots in 2010 came from Canada, Colombia, Dominican Republic, New Zealand, and countries in Eastern Europe and the Middle East/North Africa.

Culmination and Celebration of Success *(not in original scope of work)*

- In August of 2009, 175 Special Olympics athletes, youth partners, and Program leaders representing 42 U.S. states came together to learn about the success of the first year of Project UNIFY, share best practices, and educate, motivate and activate each other for the forthcoming year of student engagement.

III. Project UNIFY Evaluation Approach and Report

SO is committed to documenting the effectiveness of its programs and its principles through evidence based approaches. We believe the synergy between program evaluation and program implementation yields significant and powerful results which work to ensure the overall success and future of Project UNIFY. There is a needed focus on documented and scientific summative and formative evaluation. You will find the

independent evaluation results of the first year of Project UNIFY in the attached “Project UNIFY Evaluation Report” (See Addendum).

While the scientific data is critical, the overall evaluation schemata for Project UNIFY also included the principle of continuous improvement. As an ongoing function of our work, we reflect on, review, and incorporate changes in our activities at all levels and in all phases on a continuing basis. For Project UNIFY, we engaged formal advisory teams that reviewed activities, materials and processes and made recommendations for improvement. The teams consist of all stakeholders to ensure that all activities are reflected on and analyzed and the resulting “improvements” are appropriate and geared to program enhancement. The information obtained through our assessment measures in Year 1 is being shared with staff and constituents at all levels and serves as the foundation for improving and expanding Project UNIFY in subsequent years.

In addition, it must be acknowledged that although the Project UNIFY activities have occurred at both the national and local levels, our evaluation focus has been on measuring what happened at the school level. Because of that focus, our first year’s evaluation has centered on the specific ways in which Project UNIFY is being implemented by SO Programs through the sub-award projects. (See attached Evaluation Report for full evaluation of Program projects.) In addition, the evaluation also focused on the Global Youth Activation Summit held in conjunction with the World Games in Boise, Idaho. This event provided an opportunity to review the implications of Project UNIFY activities on individual behavior and response on a more national scale. (See attached Global Youth Activation Summit Evaluation Report.)

IV. Project UNIFY Progress and Opportunities

Over the course of Year 1 implementation, Project UNIFY has been embraced by the SO Movement as a way of thinking, a process and an outcome. Special Olympics President and Chairman, Timothy P. Shriver stated in recent comments, “ Special Olympics Project UNIFY is one of three fundamental pillars to the Special Olympics foundation as we engage a new generation of leaders advancing this century’s most vital social justice movement for promoting the rights of people of all abilities through sports, health and community acceptance.” One originally skeptical SO Program whose leaders are now championing the concept of youth engagement and leadership as an important direction for our Movement makes the case:

► **Impact: Changing the Way We Do Business**

“Year 1 PU activities have allowed Ill. to position itself to expand initiatives in 2010 and to embark upon the development of a specific strategic plan for future growth and engagement of youth as leaders. Previously, Ill. had not made this a priority. Organizational leadership has concerns regarding the use of funds and other resources directed towards what is perceived as advocacy initiatives that could be viewed as detracting from the mission of SO. However, the success of Year 1 projects has illustrated the positive impact youth can have on current and future programs. This progress needs to be leveraged internally to demonstrate that youth leadership and engagement initiatives will grow traditional participation numbers, will enhance the SO experience for athletes through peer involvement and awareness and will set the foundation for future volunteers, athletes, Unified Partners, funding, and overall support and commitment to SO. Pending funding approval, Year 2 activities will expand the reach of youth leadership initiatives on a controlled scale and allow Ill. the opportunity to develop a structured plan that outlines specifically how Ill. can utilize youth education and activation initiatives to foster peer involvement, increase participation in SO and set the stage for all of today’s youth to remain active with the movement as they age. The goal would be to add a youth initiative component to the overall strategic plan for SO ILL. Ideally this plan would be presented to organizational leadership in the spring of 2010.”

- *From Special Olympics Illinois Project UNIFY Final Report*

We believe that following a framework of Educate, Motivate, and Activate, youth who are under-informed about ID, who may hold attitudes that work passively or actively against people with ID, and who have no real engagement with youth with ID, are made aware (Educate), then supported in gaining understanding (Motivate), and, ultimately, become actively engaged in sport and non-sport activities with youth with ID (Activate).

► **Impact: Future Leaders Emerge**

“One of the Unified Partners attended Summer Games as part of Project UNIFY. On Friday he texted his Mom and said how much fun he was having. On Saturday he texted his Mom and said he thought he had a calling to work with this group of people. On Sunday when he got home he sat down with his Mom and told her he wanted to find out if Special Ed teachers participated in Special Olympics. ...This young man has decided to change his major from Chemical Engineering to Special Ed so he can be a teacher and be a Special Olympics coach! He is walking on at McNeese to be on the Track team so he can stay involved and we are going to get certified as a coach.”

- *Submitted by Special Olympics Louisiana*

We expect and hope that youth with ID gain experiences that enhance a belief in their own self worth and their role as social change agents (Educate), are provided with the resources, and the safety and security which emboldens their confidence to make a difference (Motivate), and are given leadership opportunities with their peers to advocate together (Activate) on their own behalf and that of others.

Special Olympics has gathered anecdotal and qualitative evidence as to the positive impact of Project UNIFY in the first year of the program. It is clear from the positive response that many policymakers, educators, teachers and students are hungry for innovative programs like Project UNIFY to enhance opportunities for

promoting the key values of acceptance and inclusion. Project UNIFY promotes an environment where student-led projects demonstrate the value of all young people. Project reports, site visits and testimonials from Year 1 show that SO Project UNIFY has leverage and can influence youth and the schools they attend.

► **Impact: Student Finds His Voice**

“Cody Schechter is a participant at the Unified Sports Program at Chaparral High School in Scottsdale and he has Praxis, the inability to convert thoughts into speech. Frankly, I wasn’t even sure why Cody was participating in our Global Messenger Workshop as he could only give one word answers and had obvious challenges even formulating a simple sentence. We paired Cody with Lauren Miller, a State Champion in Oratory, and a young woman with a wonderful attitude and willingness to get creative to make things work. She pretended to be a sportscaster and interviewed Cody. Cody sat in front of the parents and did a great job giving one word answers. How many years have you been in Unified Sports? “5.” Is it true that you get to participate in Bowling, Soccer, Track and Field and other sports? “Yes.” Which is your favorite? “Bowling” How many new friends have you made participating in the Program? “20+” How do you feel about Unified Sports? “Love it.”

At the end of Cody’s Speech, everyone gave him a nice round of applause but his mother became frantic. She cornered me and a couple Workshop Coaches and wanted to know if Lauren Miller could become Cody’s new Unified Sports Partner. Lauren let us know that college in Tucson was right around the corner and that this wasn’t going to be possible. Mom wouldn’t take no for an answer and what she said next had a life changing impact on all of us.

‘With Cody’s disability, he is unable to formulate his words without much challenge and hardship. As a result, he has very little interest in speaking and doesn’t say much. For the first time ever, he was totally excited to speak and asked if he could stay late and keep speaking.’

The tears streamed down all of our faces and Lauren Miller told me the next day that it was the greatest moment of her life. I still get emotional typing this.”

-Submitted by Dan Sager, SO Arizona Board Member

What we could not have known until it was experienced was the speed at which the guiding principles underlying Project UNIFY, when put into practice, would move us forward as an organization. While we were aware that much of what we wanted to achieve in youth leadership and engagement would mean a change in the way we do business, we were not prepared for the exponential impact that effectively unleashing the power of youth leadership would have on our change trajectory. What we found was that when you “practice what you preach,” as our youth leaders had challenged us to do, and listen to young people and empower them to lead and influence, change happens swiftly.

Building on Success

As we move forward, building on our success and findings from our first year, we must address several questions:

- How do we continue to monitor, measure and address the successes and challenges of Project UNIFY?
- How do we effectively examine and enhance our classroom and online resources to ensure quality and relevance?
- How do we improve our ability to enhance the skills of young people with and without ID to work together as co-creators and collaborators in sports, learning and service?
- How do we mobilize the education organizations that are our natural partners in furthering this work?
- How do we capture and articulate the principles and practices of Project UNIFY and expand them globally?
- How do we continue to educate, motivate and activate all young people in relevant and substantive ways, keeping them at the forefront of our movement, dedicated to social justice?

While we do not have the immediate answers to these questions, we are confident the information we have gained thus far provides a path forward as we continue to develop, enhance and expand Project UNIFY. There are several findings that present us with a deeper understanding of the potential opportunities for continuing development.

Specific Opportunities

- Project UNIFY was implemented almost equally in urban/suburban areas. Traditionally, Special Olympics has had difficulty engaging youth in these areas and through Project UNIFY has sought out a more effective service delivery model. Project UNIFY may be a way for Special Olympics to reach out to youth with intellectual disabilities living in urban, inner city areas.
- While some state SO Programs met with principals to introduce Project UNIFY as a school-wide initiative or activity, many state SO Programs continued to promote Project UNIFY through the same portals with which they view traditional SO programming. These portals often included special education and adapted physical education teachers to the exclusion of general education engagement. This is important to note as we develop the tools and resources to support SO Programs in their efforts to grow and expand the program.

- Although we expected state SO Programs to rely on familiar procedures for partnering with the schools, relying on existing relationships may inhibit schools viewing Project UNIFY as a new Special Olympics program. In the coming year state SO Programs could begin to build upon these existing relationships to include principals or other school administration such that Project UNIFY is viewed as a school-wide initiative and not merely another “special education sports program”.
- In Year 1 it appears state SO Programs were less inclined to reach out to middle schools than to high schools and elementary schools. This may be due in part because of the policies many SO Programs have in place that require partners be at least 16 years of age and/or require a volunteer screening. This, therefore, may be considered by state SO Programs as inappropriate for young adolescents. However, Project UNIFY presents an exceptional opportunity to partner with middle schools, based on the alignment of its principles of practice and the mission of middle level educators.
- The R-Word campaign and Be a Fan initiatives were successful in introducing more students without disabilities to Special Olympics and demonstrates the possibility of engaging students in ongoing efforts to promote inclusion and acceptance of diversity. The popularity of this activity identifies it as a significant way to engage and involve large numbers of young people.
- Project UNIFY was able to build upon traditional school-wide activities to promote the messages of inclusion and acceptance. It was encouraging that almost a quarter of schools used school assemblies or Youth Rallies and Summits to promote the messaging of Project UNIFY. More tools to promote Youth Rallies would support this trend.
- There is alignment in the characteristics and principles of practice (based on published guidelines) between the conceptual and practical frameworks of Project UNIFY and the disciplines of character education, service-learning, civic education, 21st century skill development and youth leadership. These are all critical elements to the education reforms being promoted by the current administration and education leaders. Special Olympics is finding resonance among the top advocates in this field and must capitalize on the moment with intention to be viewed as one of the immediately available resources and solutions to the challenges schools, teachers and students face as the necessary reforms are institutionalized.

- The extensive existing network of local programs that Special Olympics has in place allows for early implementation of practice on a scale that would be impossible for a completely new program or project of this nature. While this is an advantage in showing early impact, SO must also be cautious not to let the early implementation process get too far ahead of the concurrent activity of developing frameworks, cultivating support and establishing alignments with natural partners. Early success must not inhibit the ability to be nimble in what is still a demonstration project.

VI. Moving Forward with Year 2

The experience of Project UNIFY informs the work of the second year, as SO continues to improve and expand the strategies for successful implementation and progress. While the first focused on investigation of potential options and models for implementing the Project UNIFY concept, Year 2 becomes a deeper and broader expansion based on the existing evidence. As SO has gained an enhanced understanding of the tools and resources needed, as well as been enlightened by the experience of having youth leaders at the forefront in activation and engagement, program elements are becoming more refined and the methodologies more focused. This second year of programming will expand upon the main features from the demonstration. With the time consuming first year start-up operations and processes behind us, focus can now shift to advancing the work, promoting the opportunity to participate to more schools, deepening relationships with partner organizations, and providing education, training and technical assistance on Project UNIFY principles and practices to critical education stakeholders. Our emphasis is on promoting and supporting inclusive youth leadership, deepening the school/SO program collaboration and embedding programming within the school infrastructure, and progressing beyond the special education and adapted sports portal into schools and engage the administrators and general educators as co-contributors to success.

Many of the activities that make up Project UNIFY take place at the local level. Special Olympics Programs are encouraged to bring together, in an unprecedented way, integrated and tested approaches that can impact the school and broader community. Specifically, we continue to challenge SO Programs to implement and expand school and community-based educational and sports initiatives that will seek to build upon the positive effects that have been achieved through initiatives to date. We will additionally encourage them to supplement these initiatives with new ones.

Model methodologies have been identified for integrated “UNIFY School” activities at primary, middle and high school levels. Efforts have been made based on the results of what we found in the first year of Project UNIFY to identify the key components that make a successful Project UNIFY program within a school. For example, there was a distinct difference in implementation between those schools with a previous relationship with SO and those schools without. Those schools that had already partnered with SO can generally achieve

more robust results than schools for which this was their first interaction. Therefore, in Year 2 we are focusing on two broader models for how Project UNIFY can be expanded in the schools.

- Model 1: Engage schools with little or no previous relationship with their state SO Program. In these schools, Project UNIFY will emphasize connecting with other activities or programs already existing in the school and engaging students in a specific activity, like the R-Word campaign. These schools will begin in a more limited scope as a way to engage a core group of youth (and school personnel) that then expand their activities in the coming years.
- Model 2: Engage schools that already have established partnerships with their state SO Program, and build programs in those schools that have already implemented Project UNIFY. These pre-existing partnerships include school-based SO sports (traditional or Unified Sports) or schools that historically have offered facilities and recruited volunteers from the school for SO events. While these schools may also connect to other programs or groups within the school, we expect to see more activities and more innovative methods of engaging the whole school in promoting greater acceptance and social inclusion.

We will also establish a maturity index for both the SO Program and the school. This maturity index is meant to give Project UNIFY practitioners a sense of where they are, how they fit into the overall Project UNIFY picture, and what they can do to move to the next level. It is based on the Project UNIFY Key Characteristics of Effective Practice (see Addendum) and will help all Programs move forward and progress against a continuum of deeper collaboration and engagement.

Overall, our approach in Year 2 is to build upon the established Project UNIFY Operational Objectives, with a few strategic enhancements.

1. Project Expansion

- Develop models or options of best practices that can provide the basis for or expansion of a sustainable Project UNIFY in additional SO Programs.
- Expand the Young Athletes Program, an early intervention tool, to provide an enriched early childhood environment that promotes motor, communication, and social development and school readiness skills for both youth with and without ID.
- Increase the number of youth and young adults with and without ID (pre-school and up) participating in SO, including Unified Sports.

- Increase the number of local programs and opportunities for youth with and without ID, including sports, educational, and service learning, to participate in SO.
- Increase the number of local or regional SO Programs engaging in sustained partnerships with schools or education entities.

2. Professional Development

- Establish a series of training modules and conduct training in the areas of advocacy and leadership for both youth with (e.g. ALPS) and without ID.
- Educate and sensitize youth as to what ID is and how people with ID merit acceptance, support and opportunities.

3. Leadership

- Create leadership programs for youth in developing school communities to foster the acceptance of their peers with ID and the opportunity to impact attitudes.

4. Web-Based Networking

- Enhance and market interactive web-based environments for youth with and without ID to connect around common values.

5. Broaden Project UNIFY

- Develop and enhance national and international collaborations with organizations that complement Project UNIFY, to broaden the reach of Project UNIFY principles and practices.
- Test the Project UNIFY principles in select markets and circumstances beyond the U.S. to validate universality of approaches and to guide applications.

6. Evaluation

- Conduct evaluation and engage in continuous improvement that documents the successes and challenges of implementing Project UNIFY and its impact on all participants.

In Year 2 of Project UNIFY, SO will deepen and broaden engagement strategies that facilitate a culture that routinely serves up experiences and opportunities for youth in schools and communities to practice respect, dignity and advocacy for all students, including those with ID.

Our vision of a world where youth are empowered to co-collaborate to develop school communities where all young people are agents of change - fostering respect, dignity and advocacy for people with intellectual disabilities, goes beyond the next year of activities. This is much more than a one year or two year endeavor and to guide us on that path, we have established a 5 Year Strategy (See Addendum). If our ultimate

goal is to create a climate of social inclusion, which we know to be beneficial to all students – then all our activities must set the stage for long range change and impact on the way we do business as a movement as well as the way in which we are positioned in the world of sports and education.

VI. About Special Olympics

Special Olympics International (SOI) has implemented sports training and competition for people with ID continuously since its founding in 1968. Special Olympics (SO) is designed to provide opportunities for people with ID, who have been consistently isolated by society, to participate in Olympic-type sports activities, develop skills and friendships, gain competency, and demonstrate their dignity and ability to contribute to society. As an organization, SOI has come to understand how powerful a platform sport can be for demonstrating what people with ID can achieve; however, research indicates that too few members of the public have availed themselves of the opportunity to experience and understand people with ID and what they can accomplish (Siperstein, Norins & Corbin, 2003).

Because of success in the sports arena, SO is traditionally perceived as just a sports event for people with ID. This does not reflect the current reality, as SO has become a global social change movement using sport as a platform to build understanding, acceptance and tolerance for all. This is clearly part of the SO mission: to provide year-round sports training and athletic competition in a variety of Olympic-type sports for children and adults with ID, *giving them continuing opportunities to develop physical fitness, demonstrate courage, experience joy and participate in a sharing of gifts, skills and friendship with their families, other Special Olympics athletes and the community.* The focus has often been on the first part of the mission statement, with a dismissal of the important outcomes defined in the second part.

VII. References

- Norins J., Harada C. & Brecklinghaus S. (2007). Inclusion of Young People with Intellectual Disabilities in Europe Through Special Olympics Unified Sports. Washington DC. Special Olympics International. 2007.
- Siperstein, G.N., Norins, J. & Corbin, S.B. (2003). Multinational Study of Attitudes toward Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities General Findings and Calls to Action: A Special Olympics Report. Special Olympics Inc. Washington D.C.