

# Youth Leadership Guide



Special Olympics Project UNIFY® brings youth with and without intellectual disabilities together through education, sports and youth leadership to provide them with the knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to create and sustain school communities that promote acceptance, respect and human dignity. Project UNIFY, is supported in part by funding from the U.S. Department of Education. Project UNIFY combines three main components:

- 1. Inclusive Sports** – This means two things in Project UNIFY. One, students with intellectual disabilities are given the opportunity to participate in sports. Two, students with and without intellectual disabilities participate in sports alongside each other - inclusively.
- 2. Youth Leadership & Advocacy** – Project UNIFY does not merely allow young people to take leadership roles in promoting Project UNIFY in their schools and communities... it insists that they do so. For youth both with and without intellectual disabilities, those are leadership lessons that last a lifetime and youth are the pioneers of an inclusive movement.
- 3. Whole-School Engagement** – When an entire school accepts and includes students and others with intellectual disabilities, it is a powerful community of change. By giving all students (faculty and staff, too) opportunities to participate, Project UNIFY helps achieve that goal.

It is the combination of these unique components that provides the best opportunity for creating positive school climates and ensuring that all students, particularly those with intellectual disabilities, become part of the social fabric of the school.





# Introduction

## Purpose of this Resource

The Youth Leadership Guide will provide both students and educators ideas and tools to enhance youth leadership in their schools and community. This is a starting point for students and educators to better understand how youth can transform their school climate. This guide features a step-by-step process to develop school and community-based youth leadership opportunities, highlighting the ways in which they can be successful.

This guide will cover:

- Transforming Existing Clubs
- Partner's Clubs
- Youth Activation Committees

Each one of these initiatives should be used to foster inclusive youth leadership within a school or community and should include youth of all ability levels.



# Differences Between Youth Leadership Initiatives

Each initiative has its own distinct characteristics.

**Transforming existing school clubs:** an existing school club that develops into an inclusive club by including youth with and without intellectual disabilities (ID) in club leadership positions.

Benefits:

- a great first step to bring inclusive youth leadership to a school
- works well with students of all grade levels
- useful when existing clubs focus on leadership or service

**Partner’s Clubs:** a new school club focused on Special Olympics Project UNIFY that is recognized by the school administration.

Benefits:

- creates new structure at the school that allows more freedom than the current school model
- puts emphasis on the friendship aspect of Project UNIFY, creating tight bonds between students with and without ID
- valuable in a school with limited options for engagement

**Youth Activation Committees (YACs):** youth leaders with and without intellectual disabilities from the same school or community form a committee to plan activation events and strategies for other youth.

Youth Activation Committees exist at the national, state, school and local community level. While these committees have an interview and selection process on the national and state level, anyone can participate in a school or community-based YAC.

Benefits:

- within a school, a YAC can function as a club (similar to an inclusive student council)
- within the community, YAC can function as its own entity, bringing leaders from multiple schools together
- while Partner’s Club focuses on building friendships, the YAC focuses on community and/or school-wide engagement to actively transform attitudes and pursues social justice
- can work well in all grade levels, but is especially effective at the high school (and upper middle school) level where youth can develop more involved plans and strategies

Below is a quick look at the high level qualities for each initiative:

Youth Leadership Initiatives	Elementary School	Middle School	High School	Inclusive Youth Leadership	Highlights
Transforming Clubs	✓	✓	✓	✓	Existing service culture—Introductory step
Partner’s Club	✓	✓	✓	✓	New school structure—Focus on friendship
YAC		✓	✓	✓	School or community base—focus on advocacy

The following activation activities can be incorporated into each type of club depending on your school environment. Feel free to include all activation ideas into the club that works best for your school.



# Transforming Existing Clubs

In many schools, clubs may already exist that focus on leadership, community service, and improving the school environment. For these schools an existing school club can develop into an inclusive club by including youth with and without intellectual disabilities.

## Incorporating Inclusive Leadership

1. **Identify** clubs at your school that are currently working towards acceptance and understanding for all students.
2. **Connect** with the advisors, officers, and members of these clubs to better understand their current work. Ask them the follow questions:
  - Do you have a club mission?
  - What type of work is your club currently doing?
  - Do you have any students with disabilities that are a part of this club?
3. **Speak** with these club leaders about the value of inclusive youth leadership and how it aligns and enhances their goals.
4. **Visit** inclusive and special education classrooms to identify students that are interested in being part of these clubs.
  - Ask teachers to ask their students if they are interested.
  - Hang posters around school to gain interest.
5. Once these students have joined, **provide** resources for all members to better understand how to work together.

## Activation: Starting Your Club

**Plan an introductory meeting:** Have all members introduce themselves to the club and discuss their interests. This is a great way for all the students to build unity within the club. This would also be the best time to describe inclusive youth leadership, and the reasons why it is important. Please see the resource page for more information about how to hold an introductory meeting.

**Give a speech:** Ask the principal if an inclusive pair of leaders from the club can speak at an assembly about building a more inclusive school environment. This is a great way for students to see first-hand the benefits of inclusive leadership. Allow both leaders from the inclusive team to speak about the importance of unity within a school.

## Activation: Get the Word Out About Your New Club

**Advertise:** Get a group of friends together to help brainstorm how best to advertise. Come up with a fun slogan, eye-catching picture, or intriguing question that gets people interested in the work your club is doing. Invite all students to join the club and make sure you add that the club is inclusive! Invite all students to join the club and see the new inclusive elements.

**Get teachers involved:** Tell teachers about the new inclusive leadership club on campus and ask them to include information about it in their announcements. This will allow more people to become aware of the changes to the club. Target teachers from subject areas that relate to your club's goals. For example, if your club focuses on sports, involve a teacher that also coaches a school team. If your club focuses on leadership or service, identify a teacher that focuses on these elements in his or her classroom.

*"Camp Shriver was the experience of a lifetime. I had the opportunity to meet students from high schools across the state and form lifelong friendships. From a team challenge to a simple hike, we were there for each other because we were a unified group. There was never a dull moment and there was positive energy everywhere!"*

## Activation: Involve the Whole School

**Have a “Mix it Up” day on campus:** On a specific day, randomly assign students to sit at different tables for lunch – it is a great chance for students to start conversations and talk with new people. This will allow students to step out of their comfort zone and make new friends.

**Invite all club leaders from your school:** Come together and discuss how to make all clubs inclusive. Start a discussion about why inclusive youth leadership is important. Come up with ways for all of the clubs to work together and create a more inclusive school community.

## Example: Student Council Becomes Inclusive

A middle school student decided to run for President of his school. He wanted to promote acceptance, so he decided to make his Vice-President running-mate a student with an intellectual disability. He felt it was important to prove to the school that regardless of your ability, you can make a difference and be a leader within the school community. This student ultimately won the school presidency and worked to include all students on the student council.

This student council had previously been exclusive and only had students without disabilities represented, but the new President wanted the whole student body involved. The new inclusive student council was able to set an example for all the other clubs on campus, and eventually brought inclusive leadership to all aspects of student life.

*“I promised to make the school more accepting of everyone... I think I accomplished that!”*

- Peter, Student Council President

## Example: Making More Clubs Inclusive

A pair of inclusive leaders from an existing high school club spoke to their principal about the lack of inclusiveness on campus and a desire to fix it. The principal agreed that there should be a boost in inclusive youth leadership, and suggested that the students start by making a speech at an assembly about how their club became inclusive.

The next week the inclusive pair spoke to their entire school about how they felt the community was not fully represented. They told the school about inviting students from the Special Education department to become members of their club, and once the new members arrived, the current leaders realized all the talents and gifts they possessed and asked them to become leaders. This allowed the leadership team to hear opinions from all students and promote complete inclusion within the school.

*“I am a member of the Key Club on campus and I always loved going to meetings, but once we became inclusive I gained so many new fun friends.”*

- Kaitlyn, Key Club Member



# Partner's Clubs

A Partner's Club is a new school club focused around Special Olympics Project UNIFY® that is officially recognized by the school administration. This is a club that teams students with and without intellectual disabilities through sports training and competition and/or social and recreational opportunities. Partner's Clubs often are formed when there is no existing club or group in a school where young people with and without an intellectual disability can compete, build friendships, and work on projects together. This section focuses on steps to form a Partner's Club and the ways in which the club can activate its members.

## Starting a Partner's Club

1. **Determine** your school's requirements for starting a club and make sure you follow their processes. (This may include contacting an advisor, having interested students sign a petition, or hosting an information session.)
2. **Talk** to the Special Education and General Education teacher(s) at your school. Ask these questions:
  - How many students would be interested in participating?
  - Are you able to provide assistance?
3. **Contact** your local Special Olympics office and express your interest in forming a Partner's Club.
  - If you do not have a Special Education program at your school, they can help you identify local athletes who could get involved.
4. **Set up** the first official meeting with a core group of students (both with and without intellectual disabilities) and the club advisor.
5. **Invite** all students at the school for the first official meeting. Please see the resource section for how to host a meeting.

## Activation: Engaging Your Student Body

**Be Fans in the Stands:** Bring a group of friends, design big posters, gather at a local Special Olympics or Unified Sports® game or tournament, and cheer like crazy! Encourage members of your school to organize groups to be at every game or tournament to support Special Olympics athletes year-round. Start Fans in the Stands at your school to ensure that every athlete and team has supporting fans who cheer every game, rain or shine, win or lose. Please see the Partner's Club resource page for Fans in the Stands information.

**Perform *It's Our School, too!* play:** The play is written for a cast of 10-20 young people, including youth with and without intellectual disabilities. The play can be performed on a blank stage, using just chairs, or you may create an elaborate set. There are three sections of the play – Opening, the R-Word and Closing, where you can choose either to use the line suggestions in the script or you may have each actor create a line themselves, which is more pertinent to who they are. Please see the Partner's Club resource page for a copy of the play.

## Activation: Go Beyond Your Campus

**Plan weekend or after school field trips:** Set up a fun activity for all students. This can be an after school bowling trip where students can show off their skills. Or you can plan a movie trip on Saturday to see the latest blockbuster. This activity is designed to build friendships outside the school environment and have fun while doing it!

**Attended a school function together:** Gather a bunch of your friends with and without intellectual disability from the Partner's Club and attend a school sporting event, dance, or other school functions. This is a great way to show school spirit and build a more inclusive environment. Students will build friendships and create great memories with their new group of friends.

*"We wanted to spend more time together, so we had to come up with ways to see our friends outside of school."*

- Ryan, Partner's Club Member



## Activation: Educate Others

**Organize an awareness campaign:** Encourage students in your school to sign the pledge to end the use of the hurtful R-word. Students can set up a table at lunch and ask other students to stop the use of this word. Students can also host a respect day, where they focus on making “respect” the new R-word. Please see the Partner’s Club resource page to find out more information about organizing a campaign.

**Start a study/tutor program:** Studying is always easier when done with friends! Set up a time each week when students come together and study for upcoming tests. This can also be a time where students can ask each other for help if they are struggling in certain areas. While grades are improving, friendships will grow at the same time!

## Example: Partner’s Club Weekend Activities

Students in a Partner’s Club wanted to spend time with their new friends outside of school, so they brainstormed ideas of how to spend time together on the weekend. They came up with a great idea to spend every other Saturday together. The club started out by meeting at a local park to play a different sport each time. They loved to play in the morning and work on their skills. Then students arranged for different parents to drive them to museums or local attractions in the area.

One Saturday the students met up at the park and played soccer, then traveled downtown to the professional soccer team to cheer on the players. The friends were able to bond over a sport they all loved and at school on Monday they had fun stories to share.

## Example: Fans in the Stands

Some members of one Partner’s Club were also a part of the school’s “Unified Sports” team, so for one club activity they decided to cheer on the players. As Fans in the Stands they made posters and shirts to encourage the team. The Unified Sports players were so happy to see their friends from the Partner’s Club had shown up to cheer them on.

After the game all the members of the Partner’s Club and Unified Sports Team went out for a celebratory dinner where they were able to share stories about the game and the great plays that were made. This was an effective way for all the friends to bond over sports and encourage each other to do their best.

*“We have so many friends that are a part of the Unified Basketball team that we had to go out and cheer for them.”*

- Susan, Partner’s Club Member





# Youth Activation Committee

Groups of youth with and without intellectual disabilities from a school or community that work with the local or state Special Olympics Program to develop strategies and organize events to build a school community where all young people are agents of change. They promote leadership in schools by advocating for Special Olympics and the acceptance of all students. The Youth Activation Committee (YAC) can exist on a national, state, local community, or school level. This section will provide an insight into how to start a local or community YAC and the events and activities a YAC can create.

## Starting a Local Youth

1. **Determine** if you will start an official school based club or a local community endeavor.
2. **Identify** a teacher or adult leader to serve as an advisor/sponsor and meet with local principals or school administration to gain approval.
3. **Contact** local Special Olympics staff to express interest in starting a school/community YAC, and see how you can contribute to their goals.
4. **Talk** to the Special Education and General Education teacher(s) at local schools. It is important to ask them:
  - How many students with and without intellectual disabilities might be interested in getting involved?
5. **Select** what initiatives the YAC are most interested in for the year and invite other interested leaders to join.

## Activation: Getting Active

**Start a Unified Sports® program:** Unified Sports join together people with and without intellectual disabilities to play on the same team. It was inspired by a simple principle: training together and playing together is a quick path to friendship and understanding. In Unified Sports, teams are made up of people of similar age and ability, which makes practices more fun and games more challenging and exciting for all. The YAC can help organize students and community members that would be interested in forming a team. Please see the YAC resource page for more information on Unified Sports.

**Host a sports day:** Encourage members of the community, both with and without intellectual disabilities, to come out and test their sports skills. Set up different activity areas where people can practice their basketball shooting, soccer passing, or even try out bocce. The students on the YAC can be in charge of planning, advertising, and executing the event. This will help to boost leadership skills within the group.

## Activation: Spreading the Message

**Host/organize a game:** The YAC can assist the local or state Special Olympics by hosting a summer or regional game at a local school or community center. Members can also become part of the Games Organizing Committee for their local or state Special Olympics. This gives them the opportunity to use and build their leadership skills as they help to plan and execute the event.

**Plan a Youth Summit:** Invite students from the local area to join the YAC in a Youth Summit that focuses on fostering inclusion and acceptance within the community. This will allow students with and without intellectual disabilities to determine how to change the attitudes and views of other students and community members. The YAC can be in charge of planning, advertising, and executing the event. Please see the YAC resource page for more information on hosting a Youth Summit.

*"Once I saw the change in the attitudes of my students, I knew Get Into It had made a difference in this school. I am so thankful the high school Youth Activation Committee came to our school."*

- Mrs. Williams, Middle School Teacher

## Activation: Educating Young People

**Use Get Into It® in the classroom:** Members of the Youth Activation Committee can ask teachers if they can run a Get Into It lesson during one class period. Get Into It is a set of activities that promote character education and anti-bullying themes. YAC members can pick the most relevant lessons to help foster understanding within the school. YAC members can use various Get Into It resources like Movies that Move, Get Into It Active, and online interactive games. Please visit the YAC resource page for more information on Get Into It and Movies that Move.

**Host a Youth Rally:** A Youth Rally is a great way to get students and community members charged up about change and motivate them to make a difference in their community. This can take place at a school or other local community center. The YAC can be in charge of planning, advertising, and executing the event.

## Example: High School YAC Includes Local Middle School

A high school level YAC had an idea that they should incorporate the local middle school students into activities, but they had to first introduce them to Project UNIFY and the idea of acceptance and inclusion. They spoke with the administration and teachers at the middle school to come up with a way to include Project UNIFY into the classroom. The solution was for the high school students to teach Get Into It® activities in the homeroom for a week.

After the week was over, the middle school students expressed a profound change in their school climate and overall attitudes. This opened up the possibility of having new YAC leaders that came from the middle school level who understood and appreciated the value of an

inclusive environment. Through this, the YAC was able to create a blueprint of engaging students and bringing awareness to schools in their area.

## Example: Local Youth Summit

A community YAC decided to host a Youth Summit with students from around the area. A Youth Summit is a gathering of youth pairs, ages 12 to 17, who come together to discuss issues surrounding people with intellectual disabilities and how to counteract them. Each pair is composed of an athlete with an intellectual disability and a partner without an intellectual disability who are friends from the same school or community. These students are gathered as delegates to discuss acceptance, bullying, name calling, and other problems in school communities.

Once the YAC contacted all the interested students from the surrounding schools, they started planning the event. This summit was an all-day event at a local community center. The YAC arranged for different speakers to come talk about acceptance and the problems within the schools today. Then they split up into different groups to discuss solutions to the problems. Overall the students were able to walk away with a better understanding of how to improve their school.

*"Overall, I think this Summit was a great success. As a YAC member I was happy to see so many students wanting to make their schools more accepting for everyone."*

- Jonathan, Community Level YAC Member