

INTRODUCTION

Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools®

Family Engagement Toolkit

- Build Equitable Schoolwide and Community Engagement
- Enhance Communication with Families from Diverse Communities
- Grow and Sustain the UCS Program

Developed by: Third Sight, LLC for
Special Olympics North America



Special Olympics
**Unified Champion
Schools®**



Acknowledgements

This Toolkit would not have been possible without the assistance and support of the state-level Program leads and school-based Special Olympics liaisons we worked with on this project. We are further grateful to the 50 parents, family members, and caregivers of students with and without intellectual disabilities who shared with us their experiences with Unified Champion Schools.

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Recommended Citation:

Crandall, J., Banks, J., Shaewitz, D. (2025). *Unified Champion Schools: Family Engagement Toolkit*. Special Olympics North America.



The contents of this Family Engagement Toolkit were developed under funding from the US Department of Education, #H380W140001. However, those contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the US Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.



Bank of America has served as funder of the Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools® Family Engagement Toolkit and is proud to support Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools programming.



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Toolkit Resources

Accessibility and Inclusion Self-Reflection

Build Equitable Schoolwide and Community Engagement

Designing and Facilitating Inclusive UCS Leadership Team Meetings

Family Engagement Community Asset Mapping

Strategies for Schoolwide and Community Engagement
in Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools

Enhance Communication with Families from Diverse Communities

Communication Strategies for Family Engagement in Special Olympics
Unified Champion Schools

Family Engagement Short Survey

Fillable Invitations to Parents, Family Members, and Caregivers

Fillable Templates for Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools Activities:
1) Family Contact and Outreach and 2) Student Information

The STEP Framework: Participation and Inclusion in Unified Sports

Technology Tools for Communicating with Linguistically Diverse Families

Grow and Sustain the UCS Program

How to Create District and School Profiles

Empathy Interviews: A Guide for UCS Programs

Reflection Tool for Family Engagement in UCS Activities

Establishing a School-based Family Support Network





Overview

What is the Toolkit?

The Unified Champion Schools (UCS) Family Engagement Toolkit provides 14 resources designed to empower state Program leads and school personnel with strategies to promote equitable family engagement. Three primary themes are woven throughout the Toolkit:

- 1 build equitable schoolwide and community engagement
- 2 enhance communication with families from diverse communities
- 3 grow and sustain the UCS program

Who is this Toolkit for?

Special Olympics (SO) partners — state Program leads, school liaisons, coaches, and school administrators — can use the Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools® Family Engagement Toolkit to build school-wide knowledge about equitable family engagement and select strategies to enhance engagement in UCS programming.

Why is family engagement important to UCS programs and families?

Benefits of family engagement for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities include outcomes such as increased social skills, physical skills related to competitive sports, and inclusion in the broader school community and the community at large.

How do I use this Toolkit?

The UCS Family Engagement Toolkit provides downloadable and modifiable resources that promote more efficient, effective, and sustainable strategies for engaging all families. The Toolkit is modular by design — each resource is optional and can be used independently, allowing users to select what is most relevant and useful for their unique contexts.

What's included in the Toolkit?

The UCS Family Engagement Toolkit includes:

- a brief overview of why family engagement and cultural diversity, inclusion, and accessibility are important for SO partners and UCS families;
- downloadable and modifiable templates, resources, strategies, and videos to facilitate school, family, and community engagement;
- self-reflection questions to identify opportunities to improve UCS programming and increase family engagement; and
- school spotlights and videos to demonstrate how schools have promoted accessibility and inclusion through UCS.



What Research Says About Family Engagement and Cultural Diversity, Inclusion, and Accessibility

What is family engagement?

Engaging families of children with disabilities from diverse backgrounds requires:¹

- creating more collaborative relationships with parents and families;
- supporting families in a way that is culturally relevant and inclusive, including the larger family, community, and cultural context of the family; and
- providing families with background information about their child's disability and possible supports provided.

What is the difference between family involvement and family engagement?

Family involvement does not always result in family engagement. Family involvement promotes taking part in school-sanctioned, school-based activities. Family engagement requires families to participate in self-directed, shared decision-making when collaborating with school personnel.² **Figure 1** illustrates that this happens through informed dialogues, families asking questions for clarification, and shared understanding with family members.³

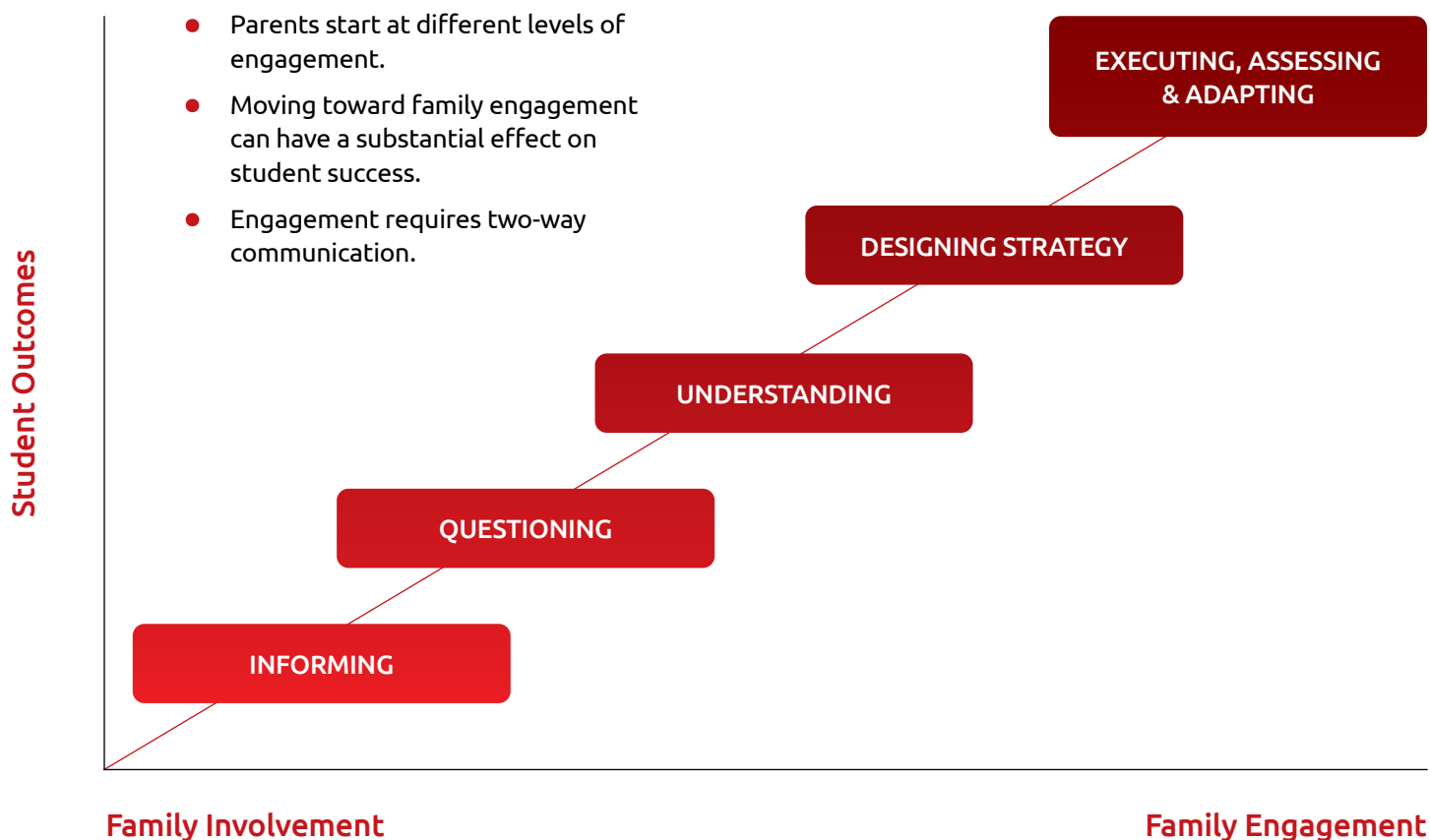
Facilitating family engagement requires that Special Olympics (SO) Program leads and liaisons collaboratively plan over time. The transition from family involvement to engagement is incremental and includes continuous communication about UCS as a first step. Moving anywhere up the curve as shown in **Figure 1** can lead to increased family engagement.

¹ Banks, J., Lamichhane, K., & Thomas, M. (2025). Engaging ethnically diverse families of children with intellectual and developmental disabilities: A systematic review. *Disability and Rehabilitation*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09638288.2025.2491827>.

² The concept of family engagement as defined in *The Power of Parent Engagement: Sociocultural Considerations in the Quest for Equity* (2017).

³ Adapted from One Green Apple LLC (2021), Parent Engagement Curve.

Figure 1. Family Engagement Continuum



Why are cultural diversity, inclusion, and accessibility important for family engagement?

Working toward **equitable family engagement** requires that **all** Special Olympics partners — state Program leads, school liaisons, coaches, and school administrators — accept and learn from the diverse perspectives of the families who participate in Special Olympics. Effective and equitable family engagement activities can contribute to a positive shift in valuing the contributions and capabilities of children with disabilities of all backgrounds.

Equitable family engagement means building reciprocal partnerships with family members that include frequent two-way communication, home-school updates, shared strategies and supports, and mutual respect for one another's expertise. SO Program leads and school liaisons can learn from the perspectives of family members and collaborate with them to ensure UCS programs are inclusive.



Building equitable family engagement in schools may require SO Program leads and liaisons to be informed about the ways that families experience exclusion.¹ SO Program leads and liaisons, other school staff, and families may have differing views about the capacity of students with disabilities. ALL Special Olympics partners will need to learn how to promote engagement strategies to address ableism² and exclusion in order to build a culturally accepting and inclusive school climate. Failure to learn and practice these strategies may lead SO Program leads and liaisons to unnecessarily exclude students from UCS activities.

Building meaningful connections with families can further engage those who have doubts about participating in UCS programs and serve as an opportunity to increase understanding of UCS programs. Learning about equitable family engagement provides SO Program leads and liaisons with insightful strategies about how to communicate the benefits of UCS for all potential participants.

How to engage diverse families

Family engagement with diverse communities requires acknowledging and navigating cultural differences. For equitable family engagement, we recommend an approach that focuses on **reciprocity, transparency, empathy, and flexibility**³ to support UCS Program leads, liaisons, and family members in identifying problems and solutions. This approach ultimately allows liaisons to make programmatic improvements that result in greater inclusion for students and families.

Reciprocity allows SO liaisons and family members from diverse communities to view each other as valuable experts in a collaborative decision-making process.

Transparency builds trust between SO liaisons and family members by ensuring that families have access to timely and relevant information.

Empathy requires the ability to listen to the perspectives of family members and make adjustments to ensure their needs are met.

Flexibility ensures communication is available in multiple modes and languages, and scheduling of events and meetings takes into consideration ways to increase accessibility for family members.

Overview of Strategies and Benefits to Increase Family Engagement

Research on evidence-based practices of family engagement⁴ identifies strategies and benefits that may increase and improve engagement with culturally and linguistically diverse families and families of children with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). These findings are shown below, and the strategies are woven throughout the UCS Family Engagement Toolkit resources. The evidence supports engagement strategies that may be adapted by Program Leads and SO liaisons to meet the localized needs of families in their communities.

⁴ Exclusion is used to describe the process that occurs when diverse students and families are denied opportunities to participate at school.

⁵ Ableism is the discrimination of and social prejudice against people with disabilities.

⁶ Liberatory Design for Equity (<https://nationalequityproject.org>)

⁷ Banks, J., Lamichhane, K., & Thomas, M. (2025). Engaging ethnically diverse families of children with intellectual and developmental disabilities: a systematic review. *Disability and Rehabilitation*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09638288.2025.2491827>.



STRATEGIES FOR MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT



Collaboration with families of children and youth with IDD through inclusive strategies includes:

- building a relationship of connection and respect with families,
- conducting collaborative goal setting with families to support children and youth,
- establishing parents-as-partners in school processes, and
- including wider support networks such as extended family and community.

BENEFITS OF ENGAGEMENT FOR FAMILY MEMBERS



Family members benefit from meaningful engagement with schools and community members. These benefits include:

- higher levels of satisfaction with school personnel relationships,
- higher levels of mental health and general personal functioning, and
- greater connectivity with other parents of children and youth with intellectual disabilities.

BENEFITS OF FAMILY ENGAGEMENT FOR YOUTH



Children and youth with IDD benefit from having family members involved in interventions in school and in community settings. When family members are engaged, children with IDD experience increases in:

- social skill development,
- friendship-making,
- academic engagement, and
- improved relationships with peers.

CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR FAMILY ENGAGEMENT



Six professional behaviors are foundational to facilitating successful family engagement: a) communication; b) commitment; c) equality; d) skills; e) trust; and f) respect. These professional behaviors can be exemplified by:

- recognizing the value and expertise of parents about their child,
- respecting the family culture,
- having a positive perspective on immigrant and bilingual parents,
- demonstrating knowledge of the profession and disability,
- avoiding jargon and defining key ideas, and
- building trust with family members.

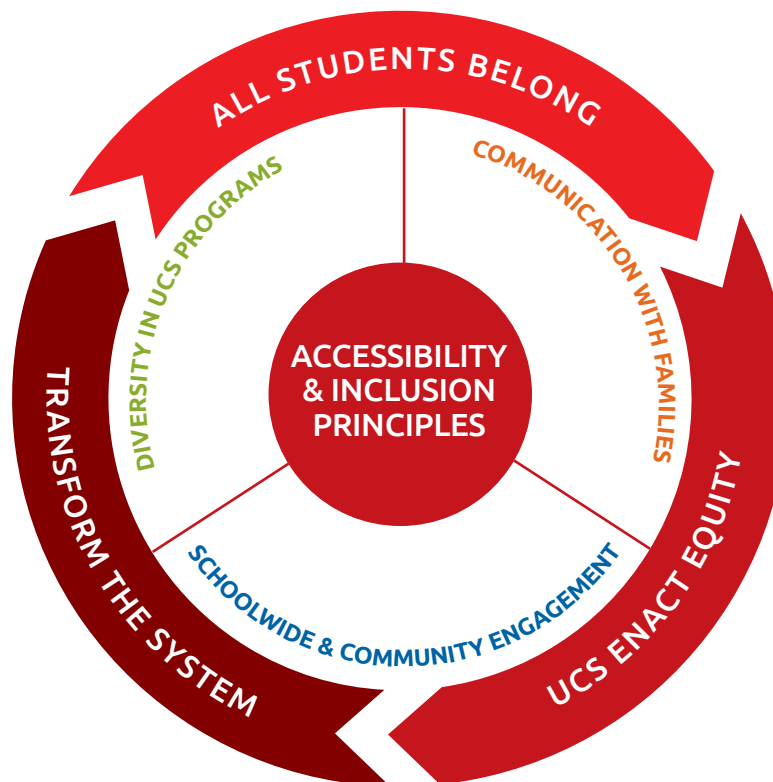
How to Build Schoolwide Accessibility and Inclusion for All

Equitable family engagement requires that Special Olympics partners — state Program leads, school liaisons, coaches, and school administrators — plan for accessibility and inclusion. Accessibility meets basic standards of ensuring that activities, including Unified PE, Young Athletes, and competitive opportunities are safe and fun for students with disabilities. Inclusion is a comprehensive way to make certain that the school leadership team, SO liaison, coaches, and youth strategically plan for and embrace all students and families.

Figure 2 illustrates the synergistic relationship between the beliefs and actions needed to build schoolwide inclusion for all. The arrows identify core beliefs while the white space represents the praxis — the behaviors or actions — needed to achieve full inclusion.

The first step in implementation of accessibility and inclusion principles is fostering the belief that **ALL students belong**. Unconscious bias can foster a narrative that all students and families must engage only in one way. For example, our school programs could be successful IF students come to school, IF they do their homework, and IF their families attend school events. These beliefs reflect limited views on family engagement and can uphold negative opinions and result in deficit mindsets about every student and family.

Figure 2: Family Engagement Toolkit Accessibility and Inclusion Principles





In contrast, equitable family engagement focuses on creating welcoming and inclusive environments where every student and their families can build genuine connections with other students and the UCS team. For example, our school programs could be successful if the curriculum incorporated the students' histories, if the school provided space during the school day for students to complete their homework, and if the school video recorded school events for families unable to attend.

The second step is to empower the SO Program leads and liaisons to **enact equity** through equitable family engagement. The focus of the Family Engagement Toolkit is on the professionals doing the work. Students and their families are recipients of an equitable system, but the designers and enactors of equitable family engagement are the SO Program leads and liaisons.

The third step is to **transform the system** to make sustainable improvements to implementation. Transforming the system for family engagement would mean to examine how the current school context is designed and to question who is included and who is excluded. Effective and equitable family engagement strategies examine how the current system involves families and is received by families, so we can redesign the system to be accessible for everyone.

The Family Engagement Toolkit provides processes, procedures, and protocols:

- to **create schoolwide and community partnerships** for inclusion with administrators, other school staff, and ultimately with families and students;
- to **establish and sustain communication with families**, so we can shift from family involvement to actively engaging families; and
- to **grow and sustain the UCS program** by increasing students' and family members' sense of belonging and enhancing their willingness to engage in UCS.

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Family Engagement exists along a continuum.
- Implementation of Special Olympics components — whole school engagement, Unified Sports, and inclusive youth leadership — is a gradual process.
- Implementation of equitable family engagement will require the support of the SO Program lead, liaison, and school.
- Building equitable family engagement practices benefit SO liaisons, other staff, students, and family members.

About the Family Engagement Toolkit

The UCS Family Engagement Toolkit provides support to state Program leads and school personnel and promotes more efficient, effective, and sustainable strategies for equitable family engagement.

Themes within the Family Engagement Toolkit emerged from interviews and focus group sessions that were conducted with state Program leads; school liaisons, administrators, and other staff; and family members and guardians.



**BUILD EQUITABLE
SCHOOLWIDE AND
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**



**ENHANCE COMMUNICATION
WITH FAMILIES FROM
DIVERSE COMMUNITIES**



**GROW AND SUSTAIN
THE UCS
PROGRAM**

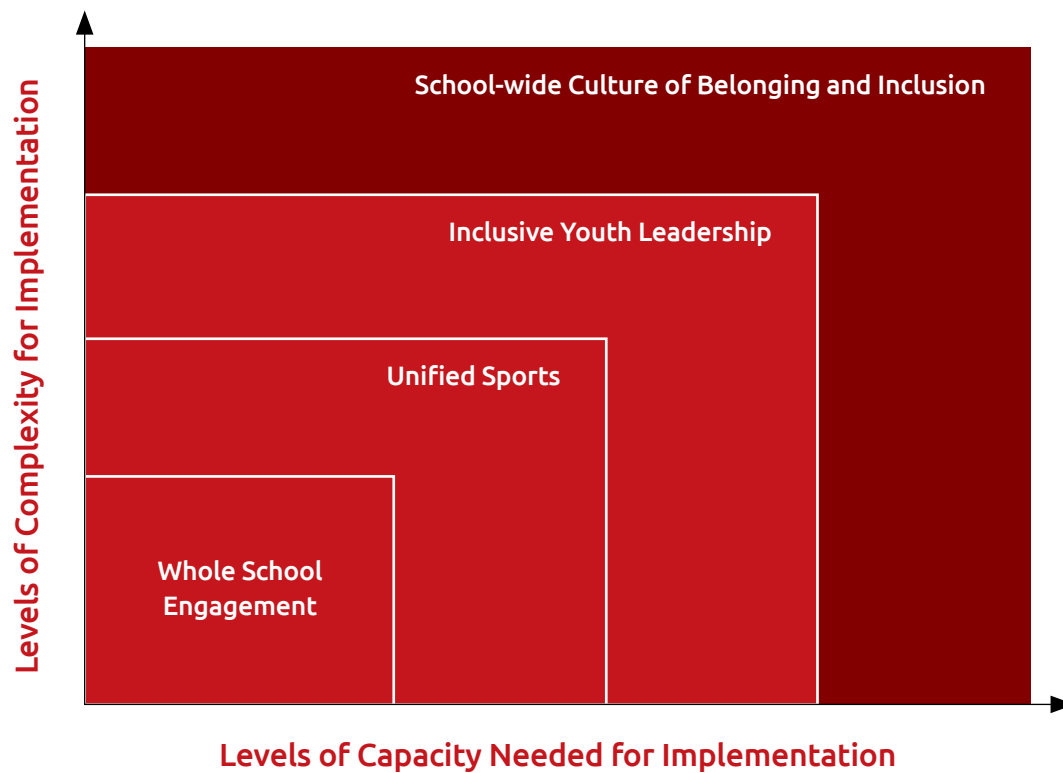
Each resource is designed to help state Program leads and liaisons consider the capacity and complexity needed to implement a UCS program. The Family Engagement Toolkit resources can be customized based on the resources and support available to meet the needs of families in each school context.

In doing so, the Family Engagement Toolkit addresses how to include families within the complexity of each UCS component and how to assess a school's capacity to implement each component (see **Figure 3**).

Levels of complexity means the degree to which implementing a UCS program or component is complex with lots of moving parts. Implementation requires coordination across multiple resources, staffing, family and students, school schedules, transportation, and other considerations.

Levels of capacity means the degree to which capacity is needed to implement a UCS program or component. Implementation requires a coordinated effort and capabilities across school staff, family, and students to successfully implement and sustain a program. Capacity includes not only the knowledge, skills, and attributes that staff need to implement a program, but also the time and resources needed for staff, family, and students to implement and sustain a program.

Figure 3: Levels of Complexity and Capacity in UCS Programs



How to Use the Toolkit

SO Program leads and liaisons can use each Toolkit resource independently to achieve a specific goal for family engagement. Resources can also be adapted to meet the needs of a localized context. However, the Toolkit is most effective when SO Program leads use all of the resources together to implement a strategic equitable family engagement plan.

Each resource includes guidance about who should use the resource, when, and how. Select resources also include reminders about how to integrate self-reflection and strengthen inclusion.

Resource Descriptions

The Toolkit resources and brief descriptions are organized below into the three primary themes that are woven throughout the UCS Family Engagement Toolkit. The first Toolkit resource — *Accessibility and Inclusion Self-Reflection* — is the recommended starting point. We suggest engaging with this resource before interacting with the other resources.

Accessibility and Inclusion Self-Reflection

This resource will help Program leads and SO liaisons begin to reflect on individual beliefs, school-wide engagement, and district supports that build accessibility and inclusion and how values and actions influence relationships with students, families, and the school system. This resource also provides ways to begin conversations about the importance of equitable family engagement with UCS team members and school administrators.



Build Equitable Schoolwide and Community Engagement

Designing and Facilitating Inclusive UCS Leadership Team Meetings

This resource will guide Program leads and liaisons through the phases needed to design and implement an inclusive team meeting. Each phase of the tool provides examples of ways to improve inclusion and collaborative decision-making with staff and family members. This resource also includes agenda templates for an introductory Leadership Team meeting and for a general Leadership Team meeting.

Family Engagement Community Asset Mapping

This resource is designed to document existing and needed resources to facilitate thinking and planning for Program leads and Special Olympics liaisons on how to build on community strengths to address family and community needs. It provides fillable forms, step-by-step procedures, and strategies for creating inclusive teams.

Strategies for Schoolwide and Community Engagement in Unified Champion Schools

This resource provides proven internal and external facing communication and engagement strategies for Program leads, liaisons, and school administrators. The internal-facing strategies focus on informing students, school personnel, and community partners about UCS programming. The external-facing strategies focus on how administrators can help their school's SO liaison in addressing perennial issues for UCS programs such as transportation, marketing, school recognition, and disability stigma.



Enhance Communication with Families from Diverse Communities

Communication Strategies for Family Engagement in UCS

This resource helps Program leads and liaisons, coaches, and other staff who engage in UCS outreach and engagement to promote inclusion for family members with different levels of communication needs, including families who speak a language at home other than English and those with different levels of literacy.

Family Engagement Short Survey

Program leads and Special Olympics liaisons can use this short, adaptable survey to get feedback on how connected parents feel to UCS activities. This quick survey can be used at any time during the school year to determine if family members feel welcome and have a sense of belonging. The survey is provided in English and Spanish.

Fillable Invitations to Parents, Family Members, and Caregivers

Family members want to understand what the UCS program is, what is going on with their students, and how they can participate in events. Program leads, Special Olympics liaisons, and physical education or Special Olympics coaches can use any of the five templates to inform families about or invite them to UCS activities. All fillable invitations are provided in English and Spanish; the four sample letters for parents are available in Amharic and Navajo.



Fillable Templates for 1) Family Contact and Outreach and 2) Student Information

Special Olympics liaisons, physical education or Special Olympics coaches, and other staff who engage in family outreach for student participation in UCS activities and/or manage administrative aspects of UCS at the school can use these templates for tracking communication with families and other pertinent details about students and their families. Included is space for students' dietary needs, motivators, and special considerations.

The STEP Framework: Participation and Inclusion in Unified Sports

Program leads, Special Olympics liaisons, and coaches can share this resource with families that are interested in how their child with disabilities can participate in Unified PE and Unified Sports. It explains how the Space, Task, Equipment, and People (STEP) framework supports participation and inclusion of students with disabilities in Unified Sports and how coaches are trained to make activities more accessible. The STEP Framework is provided in English and Spanish.

Technology Tools for Communicating with Linguistically Diverse Families

This resource will help Program leads, liaisons, and other school staff identify and select language translation tools to support communication with diverse families who speak languages other than English. The spreadsheet includes technology applications that can be used during in-person or virtual meetings, as well as tools to translate documents. This resource also includes information on video relay services available in every state to communicate with families who use American Sign Language.



Grow and Sustain the UCS Program

How to Create District and School Profiles

This resource provides a step-by-step process for Program leads and Special Olympics liaisons to develop a profile of a school and its district. The profiles include school and district data to better understand the cultural and linguistic context of a school and its school district, in addition to existing co-curricular and extra-curricular activities at the school.

Empathy Interviews: A Guide for UCS Programs

This resource offers Program leads and Special Olympics liaisons a guided process for engaging family members in an authentic, relational way. An empathy interview is designed to build trust and relationships with family members to better understand their experiences, identify where there may be opportunities for engagement, and create equitable systems that ensure all families have the opportunity to engage with UCS programming.

Reflection Tool for Family Engagement in UCS Activities

This resource presents a simple yet effective process for Program leads and liaisons to reflect on UCS program implementation and is designed to facilitate reflective practice and a continuous improvement mindset for both individuals and teams. The reflection tool also can be used to help teams share open and honest feedback about events and build trust and rapport while also helping the group evaluate UCS program outcomes.

Establishing a School-based Family Support Network

This resource provides a process for Special Olympics liaisons to establish a family support network where current or former UCS families are paired with new or potential UCS families to focus on specific technical tasks such as filling out paperwork and/or collaborative efforts that promote engagement in UCS programs. The family support outreach form to families is provided in English and Spanish.



Crosswalk of Toolkit Resources by Role, Implementation Time, and Theme

ROLE	TIME	BUILD EQUITABLE SCHOOLWIDE AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT	ENHANCE COMMUNICATION WITH FAMILIES FROM DIVERSE COMMUNITIES	GROW AND SUSTAIN THE UCS PROGRAM
ALL ROLES	0-15 min	Accessibility and Inclusion Self-Reflection		
PROGRAM LEAD	0-15 min	Designing and Facilitating Inclusive UCS Leadership Team Meetings	Family Engagement Short Survey Fillable Invitations to Parents, Family Members, and Caregivers The STEP Framework: Participation and Inclusion in Unified Sports Technology Tools for Communicating with Linguistically Diverse Families	
	15+ min	Family Engagement Community Asset Mapping Strategies for Schoolwide and Community Engagement in Unified Champion Schools	Communication Strategies for Family Engagement in UCS	How to Create District and School Profiles Empathy Interviews: A Guide for UCS Programs Reflection Tool for Family Engagement in UCS Activities



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ALL ROLES	0-15 min	Accessibility and Inclusion Self-Reflection		
SPECIAL OLYMPICS LIAISON	0-15 min	Designing and Facilitating Inclusive UCS Leadership Team Meetings	Family Engagement Short Survey Fillable Invitations to Parents, Family Members, and Caregivers Fillable Templates for Family Outreach and Engagement and Student Information The STEP Framework: Participation and Inclusion in Unified Sports Technology Tools for Communicating with Linguistically Diverse Families	Establishing a School-based Family Support Network
	15+ min	Family Engagement Community Asset Mapping Strategies for Schoolwide and Community Engagement in Unified Champion Schools	Communication Strategies for Family Engagement in UCS	How to Create District and School Profiles Empathy Interviews: A Guide for UCS Programs Reflection Tool for Family Engagement in UCS Activities



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ROLE	TIME	BUILD EQUITABLE SCHOOLWIDE AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT	ENHANCE COMMUNICATION WITH FAMILIES FROM DIVERSE COMMUNITIES	GROW AND SUSTAIN THE UCS PROGRAM
ALL ROLES	0-15 min	Accessibility and Inclusion Self-Reflection		
COACH OR OTHER STAFF	0-15 min		Fillable Invitations to Parents, Family Members, and Caregivers Fillable Templates for Family Outreach and Engagement and Student Information The STEP Framework: Participation and Inclusion in Unified Sports Technology Tools for Communicating with Linguistically Diverse Families	
	15+ min		Communication Strategies for Family Engagement in UCS	
ADMINISTRATOR	15+ min	Strategies for Schoolwide and Community Engagement in Unified Champion Schools	Communication Strategies for Family Engagement in UCS	



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