

Getting Ready



Getting Ready



Establishing a Leadership Team



Whole School Engagement



Inclusive Youth Leadership



Inclusive Sports and Fitness



Special Olympics Resources



What Does a Socially Inclusive Elementary School Look Like?

Imagine a school where no student is excluded because of a disability or the services required to meet the child's needs. All students are engaged in positive ways; a variety of experiences are offered that build on individual strengths and appreciate diversity.

As you enter the school, you see students with and without disabilities waiting at the entrances, ready to welcome students and visitors with big smiles and positive greetings. You see colorful posters and banners on the hallway walls with messages of caring, respect, and responsibility and with many students pictured.

You see students pausing in the hallway to high-five students who recently competed in a Special Olympics track and field meet. The school is a place of respect where differences are accepted and the achievements of all students are celebrated.

You see a physical education class where students with and without intellectual disabilities take on leadership roles by setting up sports skill stations. The students participate alongside each other and call one another by name as they cheer and give encouragement. In another class you see students in Young Athletes learning to jump, kick, throw, and catch, with older students coaching and mentoring.

In the cafeteria, you see students with and without disabilities sitting at the same table and talking about their plans for recess. You see students in a book club eating with a teacher as they discuss the ways leadership is demonstrated in a book they read.

During recess all students are engaged in play with other children. No students sit off to the side by themselves. Everyone is included.

Every student is given an opportunity to meaningfully contribute and participate, and students are recognized for their similarities and strengths rather than disabilities. All around you is evidence that students feel that they are a valued part of the school.



As long as all students participate in an event, isn't it socially inclusive?

Not necessarily. For example, during a traditional field day, students with special needs might be isolated from their peers and travel through sport and fitness stations in a segregated group. A Unified Sports or Game Day is different. It integrates all students. Students with disabilities participate alongside students without disabilities as peers.





Why Do We Need Socially Inclusive Elementary Schools?

The influence of the school climate is far-reaching.

Successfully meeting the needs of all students hinges largely on the climate of the school. The school climate is the quality and character of school life. It impacts every aspect of students' school experiences, from their social and emotional well-being to their academic achievement. A positive school climate promotes student learning and increases student motivation to learn.

A positive school climate is inclusive.

Creating a sense of belonging is a critical element in establishing a socially inclusive school environment. Students with disabilities are more likely to experience social isolation within school and participate in fewer school-based social activities and clubs than their peers without disabilities. Social isolation can have negative effects on students' academic performance, behavior, and health. A positive school climate creates the conditions where diversity is valued and every student is a contributing member. It creates a sense of belonging for all students. It ensures that students with and without disabilities have frequent opportunities to interact.

The elementary school years are optimal years for students to develop empathy and social awareness.

This is a particularly critical time for students to experience social inclusion. Around ages six to seven years old, students become cognitively capable of understanding someone else's perspective and developing empathy. Bullying and other negative behaviors are less likely to occur in school environments where students understand and appreciate differences. Plus, attitudes of acceptance that are formed early are likely to stick for life.

Does talking about differences single kids out?

Sometimes teachers are concerned that if they acknowledge differences, they're also spotlighting those differences. However, experience at Unified Champion Schools shows that opening the conversation so students can ask questions about disabilities doesn't single kids out; instead it's an important step toward **building knowledge, understanding, and acceptance** and helping to ensure that a lack of understanding doesn't lead to bullying and other harmful behaviors.



Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools Research

- There is a strong relationship between **school connectedness** and regular school attendance.
- Children with disabilities are **two to three times** more likely to be bullied than their peers without disabilities.



How Do We Get Changes in School Environments to Stick?

Here's what a leading educational researcher says.

- **Lots of voices.** Start with school leaders. They'll have a chance to ask questions and create and share a vision for implementation. For change to take hold, all school stakeholders must be involved and connected with the process from beginning to end. Students, teachers, parents, administrators, and others must know that they have a voice and also be aware that their involvement is not simply an option, but instead, is a valued and extremely critical component for sustainable, student-centered change.
- **Where are we—and where do we want to be?** For change to be more than the “flavor of the month,” a school must figure out the gap between the where we are and where we want to be. That takes leadership. Building the leadership skills of children, adults, and others who support the school is key.
- **Collaboration counts.** Research suggests that working and planning in isolation leads to few or no significant gains. Educators need time that's dedicated to rich collaboration.
- **No add-ons.** Tying changes to the curriculum and to the smooth management of the classroom and school provides a springboard for higher levels of sustained success. If the curriculum is tied in—such as through the lessons in this handbook, starting on page 104—and the school atmosphere improves, the changes are more likely to take hold.
- **Change is hard; celebrate successes.** Team members will be asking themselves, *Who will embrace the change? Who will avoid it? Will students learn more? Who will lead the next stage? How will we know if we're succeeding? Will the change stick?* Frequent, authentic celebrations go a long way toward energizing and encouraging your team.

A sustainable change is in the best interest of the entire school. With Unified Champion Schools, that positive impact will be lasting, life-changing, and well worth all of the hard work.

— Adapted from the research of Dr. James Davis, Program Coordinator, Coastal Carolina University, Conway, SC.



The **form** starting on page 40 makes it easy to assess your **school's progress** toward social inclusion.



What Is the Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools Program?

The vision

Since its founding, Special Olympics has been providing quality sports opportunities for individuals with intellectual disabilities across the globe. Today, Special Olympics serves as a **driving force for social inclusion**. The vision is to create a world where “people of all abilities, including those with intellectual disabilities, are welcomed in their communities and join with others to learn, work, compete, and play with the same rights and opportunities as others.”

Youth are a central focus

Special Olympics views students as “powerful and effective advocates...open-minded to new things” and as having “the courage of conviction to step up and defend their beliefs. For this reason, [Special Olympics] find(s) that young people are some of the most powerful and effective advocates on behalf of acceptance.”



An inclusion strategy for schools

Since 2008, Special Olympics has been actively engaged in the development and implementation of a school-based strategy supported and endorsed by the US Office of Special Education Programs at the US Department of Education. The **Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools program** is aimed at promoting social inclusion through intentionally planned and implemented activities to produce system-wide change.

With sports as the program’s foundation, the Unified Champion Schools program has three main components: **inclusive sports, inclusive youth leadership, and whole school engagement**. Unified Champion Schools share a climate of acceptance where students with disabilities feel welcome and are routinely included in, and feel a part of, all school activities, opportunities, and functions.



Unified Champion Schools promote a school climate that

- is free from bullying and exclusion.
- combats stereotypes and negative attitudes.
- eliminates hurtful language.
- promotes healthy activity and interactions.
- is welcoming and values the engagement of all students.

Youth as leaders

The Unified Champion School program is not designed so that teachers and other adults create programs and students participate. Instead, students with and without intellectual disabilities become architects of lasting change and community building; adults serve as *allies to youth*, rather than *managers of youth*. An important part of the Unified Champion Schools program is that goals and work are shared by youth and adults. In elementary schools, adults help students develop age-appropriate leadership skills that lay a strong foundation for middle and high school years when students take an even more active role in planning and implementing unified sports and events.



Within Unified Champion Schools

Here's what you'll see:

- Students with and without intellectual disabilities have opportunities for physical activity and for building positive peer relationships across the school setting—in hallways and lunchrooms, in classrooms and gymnasiums, and on athletic fields.
- Students with and without intellectual disabilities have opportunities to interact with their peers and to learn and grow.

At its core, the Unified Champion Schools strategy is not just about including students with disabilities, but **unifying all students**; moving from adult-led programming to **student-led mobilization and action**; and transitioning from sports as recreation to **sports as a catalyst for social inclusion** and change.

More information on how schools can promote social inclusion can be found at <https://resources.specialolympics.org/unified-champion-schools-resources/>.



How Does the Unified Champion Schools Program Support School Initiatives?

The Unified Champion Schools program enhances a number of key educational goals, benefitting all students, not just those with special needs. The initiatives found below are frequently a part of school improvement plans designed to increase student success. **If you are already focusing on any of these initiatives, becoming a Unified Champion School will enhance your existing emphasis.**

Provide a positive school climate free of bullying.

Context matters. A school climate can foster or undermine students' development, learning, and achievement. Students perform better academically, socially, and emotionally when they are meaningfully engaged, contributing members of a school with a positive and caring school climate. The Unified Champion Schools program creates **safe and accepting school climates** for all students, providing a clear path to eliminating negative behaviors such as teasing and bullying and building **positive, caring, authentic relationships** among students with and without disabilities.

Promote a culture of strong engagement.

Students who are highly engaged in school feel connected. They know they are **valued contributors** to the school community. They are more motivated to attend school, participate in class and school activities, have stronger academic achievement, and are less likely to engage in negative behavior such as bullying.

The Unified Champion Schools program strives to engage **all youth as leaders**, not just the high-achievers and the "doers." **Atypical leaders**, such as students who are introverts, students with intellectual disabilities, or students who are at risk for poor academic performance, have many opportunities to develop leadership skills. These experiences boost their self-esteem and increase their engagement in the school community.

Maximize academic achievement and develop 21st century skills.

The positive, socially inclusive environment evident in Unified Champion Schools contributes to strong or improved academic achievement. In addition to students forming a foundation of core skills, students have experiences that develop competencies critical for 21st century learning, such as **communication** and **collaboration** skills, **creativity**, and **critical thinking**. As diverse students interact in socially inclusive learning activities, they develop the foundation for effective leadership skills.





Support the physical health of all students.

Regular physical activity doesn't just improve a student's overall physical health. Additional benefits include increased concentration and problem solving, which can lead to better academic performance, self-esteem, and social skills such as teamwork. Unified Champion Schools promote physical health and fitness by providing a variety of **inclusive sports and fitness** activities.

Advance the social-emotional development of all students.

Social-emotional skills influence a student's connectedness to school, classroom behavior, and academic achievement. Students with poor social-emotional skills become less connected to school as they move from elementary to middle to high school. This negatively affects their school performance, behavior, and health. The Unified Champion Schools program enhances social-emotional development through sports and games that foster cooperation and teamwork as well as through a variety of socially inclusive activities. The program increases students' key competencies of social-emotional learning, including **self-awareness, social awareness, relationship skills, self-management skills, and decision-making skills**.



Cultivate partnerships with parents and the community.

Without a doubt, the role that families play in a child's education is critical. When families partner with schools, students attend school more regularly, perform better academically, and demonstrate more positive attitudes and behaviors.^{1,2} When other community members lend their support as well, the entire community sees the benefits. The Unified Champion Schools program **engages families and other community members** at all stages—from planning and implementing activities to celebrating students' successes.

Unified Champion Schools perform better than other schools on most school climate measures such as respect for **diversity, social and civic learning, school connectedness, and engagement**.



The Numbers Tell the Story: Why Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools Are Needed

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The Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools program promotes a socially inclusive school climate where acceptance, respect, and human dignity for all students are the norm. Within Unified Champion Schools, students without disabilities hold more positive attitudes toward their peers with intellectual disabilities, are more tolerant, and realize the impact their words and actions have on others. As the facts and figures below show, a Unified Champion School equitably supports students with and without intellectual disabilities and fosters meaningful opportunities for every student to contribute to the school community.

2

Unified Champion Schools at the middle school and high school level report the following³:

7

- 92% observed heightened **awareness** of students with intellectual disabilities.
- 91% observed a more **socially inclusive environment** as a result of the program.
- 90% observed increased opportunities for students with and without disabilities to **work together**.
- 86% observed an increase of students with intellectual disabilities **participating** in school activities.
- 84% observed **reduced bullying**, teasing, and offensive language.

Students learn **pro-social skills** in Unified Champion Schools:

3

- 69% learned about standing up for something.
- 67% learned about working with others.
- 59% learned about helping others.
- 57% learned about becoming more patient.
- 50% learned about identifying qualities they have in common with students of different abilities.

“My son has improved his social skills.... His world-view of ‘this is what I can do and this is how I have to do it’ has been expanded beyond the limitations of the educational program that he’s in. He looks for ways that he can meet society at his level and in his way, rather than hiding from his peers who are not special needs. There’s nothing good enough that I can say about this program. It’s a necessity.”

—Parent



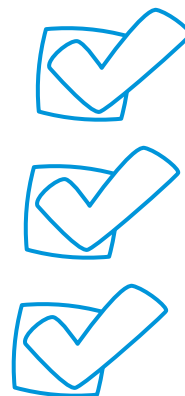
How Does the Special Olympics Unified Champion School Program Work?

The program is designed to be woven into the fabric of the school, enhancing current efforts and providing rich opportunities that lead to meaningful change in creating a socially inclusive school that engages and supports all learners. What a Unified Champion School looks like varies from school to school; but the basic building blocks remain the same.

Three main components

A Unified Champion School implements three components, each of which is intertwined with the others in a cohesive effort to increase social inclusion throughout the school. Each component enhances the program in different ways, so it is important for all three components to be implemented. The components are:

- **Whole School Engagement:** Awareness and education activities that promote respect and social inclusion and reach the majority of students and school staff members.
- **Inclusive Youth Leadership:** Encouraging students with and without intellectual disabilities to take on leading roles as they work with adults in the school to create a socially inclusive environment through sports and other activities.
- **Inclusive Sports:** Opportunities for students with and without intellectual disabilities to participate in a variety of fitness, play, and sports activities alongside one another.

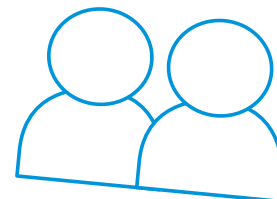


Inclusion tip

In working toward becoming a socially inclusive school, it is important for the entire school community to remember that **all students are peers first**. The subgroups to which they belong are secondary to their status as peers.



Tips for Implementing the Unified Champion Schools Program



Facilitate relationships.

The interactions between students and the authentic friendships they form are at the crux of the Unified Champion Schools program. Young people can make a difference through friendships. However, the structure and schedule of many schools provide limited opportunities for authentic relationships between students with and without intellectual disabilities to flourish. The Unified strategy changes that. It creates situations in which relationships can grow.

Encourage everyone to contribute.

By offering a combination of inclusive sports and youth leadership options, as well as a variety of activities that engage students throughout the school, the entire school community has a part in building a socially inclusive climate. At Unified Champion Schools that climate is one free from teasing, bullying, and exclusion.

Fit the program to your school environment.

Every school has different resources, visions, and challenges. That's why the implementation of the Unified Champion Schools program varies by school. The program is most effective when a team of leaders strategically moves the school community forward in creating intentional opportunities for social inclusion.

Invite input from staff at different grade levels and students of different ages and abilities.

An inclusive Unified Champion School Leadership Team helps ensure that efforts are thoughtfully planned and implemented to support the school's initiatives and priorities. Because students and adults experience the school from different perspectives, both groups must be engaged to create lasting change.

Provide opportunities across the three program components.

Creating a socially inclusive school makes social inclusion a way of life. Inclusive opportunities should incorporate a combination of the three program components and multiple opportunities for all students to be engaged in a variety of ways.





Examples of how the program components work together

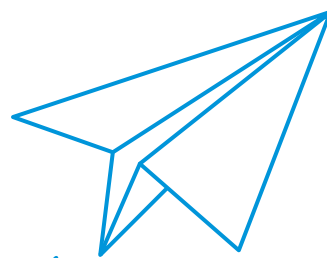
The PE teacher provides an inclusive obstacle course experience.

- **Youth leadership:** Students with and without intellectual disabilities help design and set up the course.
- **Inclusive sports:** Students improve their physical fitness as they complete the course.

The school holds a respect campaign that includes class and schoolwide activities.

- **Youth leadership:** Each teacher tasks his or her students with treating others the same way each student himself would like to be treated. Students are responsible for brainstorming ideas, deciding on a plan, and carrying out the plan.
- **Whole school engagement:** The respect campaign is launched with a schoolwide rally featuring a motivational speaker. All students and staff members sign a banner with a pledge to use words of respect.

(Find more ideas for planning a respect campaign on pages 72–74).





How Does It All Come Together?

Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools has identified seven **key characteristics** of effective socially inclusive learning environments.

Characteristics are divided into two categories: core processes and operational processes. They're both important. Core processes address the unique aspects of creating a socially inclusive environment. They are:

- establishing a vibrant role for inclusive youth leadership
- creating and sustaining relationships between students with and without intellectual disabilities, focusing on abilities and not perceived limitations
- unifying programming to eliminate separation
- fostering school and community collaborations to promote inclusive environments.

Operational processes are tasks that any organization seeking a sustainable change would need to address. They are:

- communication
- professional development
- continuous improvement.

Element 1

Inclusive Youth Leadership

Element 2

Creating & Sustaining Relationships

Element 3

Unifying Programming

Element 4

School/Community Collaborations

Core Processes

Operational Processes

Element 5

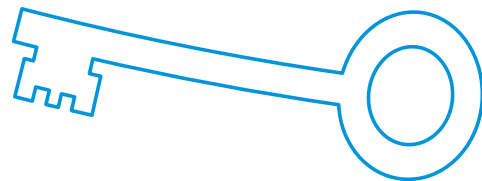
Communication

Element 6

Professional Development

Element 7

Continuous Improvement





This chart shows how these characteristics intertwine with the three components of Unified Champion Schools and might be demonstrated in schools. Many activities can reinforce more than one component of the program.

Examples of the Components of Socially Inclusive Schools	UCS Components
Youth leadership Students set up sports skill stations and lead warm-up drills for Young Athletes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inclusive Youth Leadership • Inclusive Sports
Students write invitations or design flyers to be sent home for a Unified Sports Day.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inclusive Youth Leadership • Whole School Engagement
Creating and sustaining relationships Students with and without intellectual disabilities are paired during recess to enjoy noncompetitive games together as Recess Buddies.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inclusive Sports
The school hosts an inclusive Family Bowling Night.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inclusive Sports • Whole School Engagement
Unifying programming All students have the opportunity to participate in inclusive school clubs, such as a gardening club, student council, an art club, and the school safety patrol.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inclusive Youth Leadership • Whole School Engagement
Students participate in Unified Physical Education classes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inclusive Sports
School and community collaborations Students with and without intellectual disabilities complete community service projects.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whole School Engagement • Inclusive Youth Leadership
An adult Special Olympics athlete speaks at a schoolwide rally for a Respect Campaign.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whole School Engagement
Communication The school principal gives weekly morning announcements that promote respect, responsibility, and social inclusion.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whole School Engagement
The Unified Champion Schools leadership team reaches out to students and parents for feedback about a recent Unified Sports Day.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whole School Engagement • Inclusive Youth Leadership • Inclusive Sports
Professional development Instruction about inclusive teaching strategies is provided for all teaching staff.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whole School Engagement
Coaches for Special Olympics Unified Sports complete an online training course.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unified Sports
Continuous improvement Teachers provide opportunities for students to reflect on socially inclusive activities and how their participation has influenced them.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inclusive Youth Leadership
The Unified Champion Schools leadership team completes an end-of-the-year assessment and sets goals for the next school year.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whole School Engagement • Inclusive Youth Leadership



What Do Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools Look Like?

Example #1:

Harbison West Elementary School
Columbia, SC



Read All About It: Totally Awesome!

Plenty of awesome things are happening at Harbison West Elementary School in Columbia, SC—including a program called Project Au-Some that’s brimming with **inclusive youth leadership** and **whole school engagement**. Students and staff advocate for kindness, empathy, acceptance, and community, all while having lots of fun.

Project Au-Some and the UCS program began in 2015. Preschool teacher Beth Reilly visited fifth-grade teacher Brenna Lamprey’s class to read *My Brother Charlie*, a story about a girl and her twin brother, Charlie, who has autism. That launched a discussion about the autism spectrum, behaviors that students with autism might show, and how students with and without autism are similar. Ms. Reilly explained that some of the students in her class had autism.

Once students understood more about autism, the fifth graders were invited to volunteer to spend time with Ms. Reilly’s preschoolers. “To our amazement, every fifth grader volunteered their time,” Ms. Lamprey recalls. Since so many wanted to help, students were chosen randomly and visited the younger class in groups of three. During the visits they participated in all kinds of teacher-led activities, from shaving cream writing to an obstacle course to pumpkin carving. After each meeting Ms. Reilly led discussions. On Fridays the groups shared pictures and talked about their week.

The experiences didn’t stop there. The fifth grade Big Buddies began researching various physical and intellectual disabilities and what it meant to be advocates for their preschool pals. Soon the fifth-grade volunteers were working with Ms. Reilly to brainstorm ideas and help plan lessons.

“The opportunity to provide the Big Buddies with leadership roles, while learning about empathy and acceptance, became contagious throughout our school family,” Ms. Reilly says. The students shared their learning with peers and community members during Exceptional Students’ Week and through a project-based learning unit on disabilities. They also used their skills in planning a preschool field day. What a great finale to an amazing school year!



Growing, growing

As the next school year started, Project Au-Some grew even more; 23 classes were paired as buddies. Literature continued to play a major role in helping students learn to relate to one another. “Books are helping students to gain a deeper understanding of individual differences and giving them an opportunity to connect their feelings about characters to real-world situations,” Ms. Lamprey says. “Big Buddies are continuing to learn and grow through these literary and real-world experiences.”

Project Au-Some spread to two of the middle schools in the district as Club Au-Some. Club members visit the elementary school once a semester to lead activities they’ve planned. Big Buddies are getting involved outside of school as well as supporting the South Carolina Autism Society’s Strides for Autism walk.

Harbison West also has unified physical education classes. Students get to play, learn, and have fun together in their PE classes all year long.

There’s no other word for it: the UCS program at Harbison West is totally Au-Some!



Books, books, books

Here are some of the titles students have read.

Since We’re Friends, by Celeste Shally

This story of two boys—one of whom is a student with autism—shows the authentic ways they make their friendship work.

All My Stripes, by Shaina Rudolph and Danielle Royer

Zane worries that his “autistic stripe” is all that anyone sees.

My Brother Charlie, by Holly Robinson Peete and Ryan Elizabeth Peete

This book is about a boy with autism, as told by his twin sister.

The Paper Bag Princess, by Robert Munsch

This unusual princess is supposed to marry the prince, but first she has to save him from a dragon.

The Most Magnificent Thing, by Ashley Spires

A little girl demonstrates perseverance and imagination as she tries over and over to make something magnificent.

Going Places, by Peter and Paul Reynolds

A go-cart contest inspires imagination and teamwork.

Confessions of a Former Bully, by Trudy Ludwig

Best for upper elementary and middle school students, this book is written from the perspective of an 11-year-old girl as a consequence for her acts of bullying.

Sky Color, by Peter H. Reynolds

After observing the world carefully from different points of view, Marisol is inspired to expand her thinking about the color of the sky.

Oliver, by Birgitta Sif

A little boy uses his imagination for companionship, with his toys as his companions, until one day he meets a new friend.

Wonder, by R.J. Palacio

This book and movie are about a boy born with facial differences that have kept him from attending school. Now his challenge is convincing his new classmates that he is just like them.



What Do Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools Look Like?

Example #2:

Hinkle Creek Elementary School
Noblesville, IN

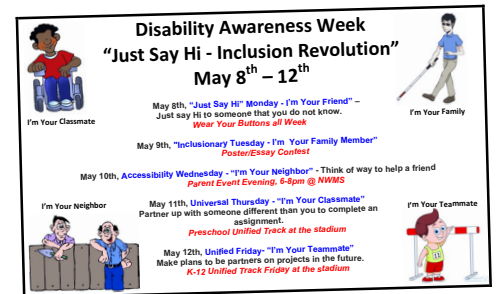
Inclusion Revolution: Disability Awareness Week

At Hinkle Creek Elementary School in Noblesville, Indiana, Disability Awareness Week is held in May, and it's bursting with opportunities for **inclusive youth leadership, whole school engagement, and inclusive sports**. Located north of Indianapolis, Hinkle Creek is one of ten schools in the Noblesville Schools district. Hinkle Creek has 961 students; just over 17% of the school's student population has been identified as having a disability.

Disability Awareness Week programs teach the importance of including all students. Inclusive student leaders design events and make morning announcements about the events to get the entire school motivated and involved.

Throughout the week students and staff read books, watch videos, and discuss topics such as the many ways we are the same and different. They also talk about sharing our gifts, saying hello to people we don't know, and the Special Olympics R-Word Campaign.

During the week staff members and student leaders help fundraise for Special Olympics Indiana's Unified programs plus the school district and county Special Olympics programs. In 2016 the district raised over \$12,000.



"JUST SAY HI"



INCLUSION REVOLUTION



Let the games begin

Hinkle Creek Elementary began UCS in 2016 with more than 50 students with and without disabilities participating. For 12 weeks both general education and special education students practiced during PE classes and recess before participating in a district-wide Unified Game Day.

The Unified Game Day had lots of pageantry and excitement. A staff member jogged the torch into the high school stadium with a Hinkle Creek student. Students participated in running, throwing, jumping, and wheelchair events.

Mark Booth, Noblesville Schools Director of Special Education, says that parents often told him that they didn't know what to expect at the event—but that they were thrilled with the outcome. "They tell me that this was one of the most amazing things that their child has ever been involved in," Mr. Booth says. "There are tears of joy that they've found something that their kids can be a part of."

The entire week of activities makes Hinkle Creek a special place for both general and special education students. Through their involvement in the UCS program, Hinkle Creek Elementary has become a UCS Banner School.

A Glance at Hinkle Creek Events

Daily themes:

Just Say "Hi" Monday—Say "Hi" to someone that you do not know.

Inclusionary Tuesday—Create posters or write essays about the benefits of being inclusive.

Accessibility Wednesday—Think of a way to help a friend.

Universal Thursday—Partner up with someone different to complete an assignment.

Unified Friday—Make plans to be partners with a new friend on projects in the future.

There's even an **Inclusionary Oath** that students take:

I am proud to be an inclusive [list your school mascot here].

I will EMPOWER everyone to join in and participate.

I will ENGAGE with all learners.

I will INSPIRE everyone to join our inclusion revolution.

A strong [list your school mascot here] community includes everyone!



Watch a **video** of the Noblesville Schools Unified Game Day at
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fyUZSilt79U&t=16s>.



What Do Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools Look Like?

Example #3:

Meadow Brook Elementary School
Forest Hills Public Schools
Grand Rapids, MI

Linking Students Makes All the Difference

At Meadow Brook Elementary School, K–4 students have the opportunity to sign up to be LINKS—that is, Loyal, Interested, Nurturing, Kind Students. One hundred and thirty five students participate in LINKS/UCS; each student in the cognitively impaired program has a LINKS partner for each school day, leading to lots of opportunities for **inclusive youth leadership, whole school engagement, and inclusive sports.**

Inclusion occurs throughout each school day, every day. Students from two cognitively impaired classrooms have LINKS partners during classroom inclusion, specials, lunch, recess, field trips; through bus buddies; and more. When possible, students keep these partners throughout the years to allow friendships to deepen and bonds to grow.

Making plans

Each year the UCS program at Meadow Brook has a new theme, colors, t-shirt design, and wristbands. Students wear their t-shirts to events and Youth Activation Committee meetings throughout the year. Every student, teacher, and staff member that participates in UCS/LINKS in the school gets a shirt. (See the list of some of Meadow Brook’s unique and inspiring themes.)

Several times each month the inclusive Youth Activation Committee meets during lunch to brainstorm and plan for UCS activities. Afterwards, students participate in inclusive matches of bocce ball. Matches take place in two or three areas of the school, and staff are assigned to each. There are two to three special bocce ball events each school year against other schools or adult teams including school district staff and school board members, which increases awareness throughout the community. Each year when the ISD maintenance staff visits to play bocce ball, they make the day extra memorable by bringing medals made out of cookies for the students. Field day and the school carnival feature the school’s inclusive sport of bocce ball as well.





Plans in action

Service learning projects are inclusive as well. Groups of students work together to decorate brown bags for the Kids Food Basket, which provides meals and food for families in need. The cheerful, hand-decorated bags always add a nice touch and help show extra care and concern for students and families.

Fixing up the school's courtyard is another popular inclusive activity. The courtyard is enclosed in the center of the school building. There's always something to do; students weed, rake, spread mulch, and plant so everyone can enjoy a beautiful space.

Each year there's a school-wide campaign focused on Respect for All, which happens around Martin Luther King Jr. Day. Students see large displays in the hallways and attend an assembly (families are invited too). As a follow-up, one year students worked together to create a display with a huge fish mural and the theme "We may all be different; in this school we swim together." Other ideas have included having each student decorate a foot, symbolizing "taking a stand/taking a step" toward respect for all; signing a slip of paper (confetti) to create a mural encouraging kids to "throw kindness around like confetti" creating unique glasses surrounding the book *Wonder* and the theme "We Are All Wonders," with the tagline "Look with kindness and you will always find Wonder."

At the end of each school year, Meadow Brook holds an awards ceremony for students and families. All participants and guests view a slide show. Participants (students and staff) receive a medal and a certificate and enjoy cake to celebrate the year.

"Being a part of the Unified Champion Schools Family has transformed our school," says Ginny Grit, LMSW, School Social Worker at Meadow Brook. "We pride ourselves on being a school that is welcoming and inclusive, embraces abilities, respects all, and celebrates differences."

Meadow Brook's recent UCS program themes:

- Be a HERO (Helping Everyone Respect Others)
- Not all superheroes wear capes
- Change doesn't happen from the sidelines
- TEAM (Together Everyone Achieves More)





What Do Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools Look Like?

Example #4:

Griggs Road Elementary
Clover, SC



Full of Heart: Welcome to Griggs Road Elementary

Kids are kids; everyone is unique and everyone has differences. That's what students and teachers say and what you'll see again and again at Griggs Road Elementary. **Whole school engagement and inclusive sports** are a centerpiece at this Unified Champion School.

Special needs students in Ms. Phoebe O'Toole's class pair up with second, third, and fourth-grade general education buddies. Lasting friendships between buddies are easy to see throughout the school. "Students will come by to ask their buddy, 'How did your project go?' or 'How is your reading coming along? Sit by me at lunch and tell me about it,'" Ms. O'Toole says. "My students are so much more independent now that they have buddies around the school to help them."

Over the years teachers have learned that the student who makes a good buddy isn't always the child you'd expect. Students who are natural leaders or academic standouts sometimes make great buddies, but other times the best buddies are kids who "just have the heart for it," Ms. O'Toole says. Students who are quiet leaders sometimes make the biggest difference.

The staff is just as supportive. The custodial staff, the principal, the office staff, and, of course, teachers and parents all work together to help the whole student population grow.

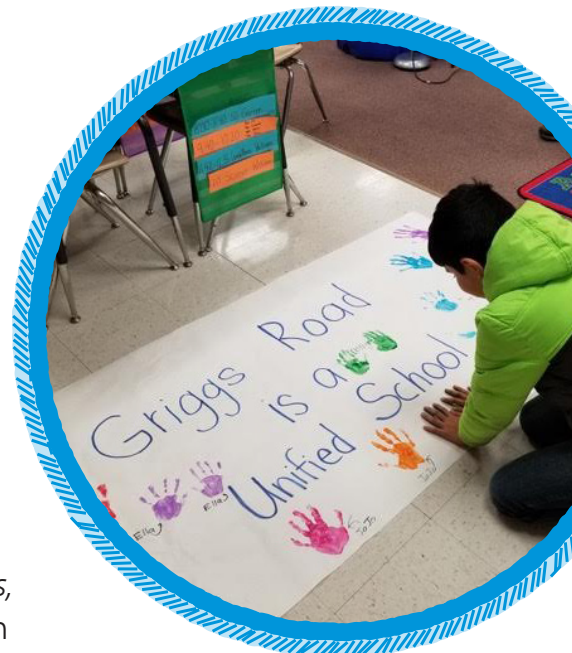


A peek inside

The week starts with Magic Monday at Griggs Road Elementary. Each week the whole school gathers in the multipurpose room, and everyone is recognized for achievements, setting the tone for a positive and successful week ahead.

Staff works to provide maximum opportunities for inclusion. Physical education and other specials, lunch, and field trips are all combined. Many science and social studies classes are inclusive. Special needs students push themselves to achieve in math and language arts, too, so they can participate in inclusive classes there as well. The difference even shows on standardized tests; students try harder and are scoring well, Ms. O'Toole reports.

The staff includes books such as *My Best Friend Will*, *The Sneetches*, and *Wonder* to get students thinking about what makes each person special. They also use activities from the Get Into It lessons and work to help students understand what it means to have autism, cognitive impairments, and physical impairments.



There's time for physical activity, too. Sports events and practices take place after school. Students practice bowling on a Unified team and other students serve as Fans in the Stands. In years past the school had a Unified Cheer team as well.

The send-off for students participating in the Special Olympics games is one of the highlights of the year. Ms. O'Toole says, "The whole school lines up, they wave and cheer and make posters. The kids head off to the games feeling very special and ready to succeed." Every day, in so many ways, Griggs Road Elementary is a standout UCS success story.