

Joint Position Paper

Special Olympics North America, NCPEID and SHAPE America

Title: Unified Physical Education: An Instructional Strategy for Achieving Active and Meaningful Participation for All

Executive Summary

This joint position paper is a collaboration between Special Olympics North America (SONA), the National Consortium for Physical Education for Individuals with Disabilities (NCPEID), and SHAPE America – Society of Health and Physical Educators. It is intended for educators, parents, school administrators, Special Olympics Program staff, and the higher education community. The intent is to help clarify the purpose, design, and implementation of Special Olympics Unified Physical Education (Unified PE or UPE). This includes appropriate student placement and instructional delivery, as well as reinforcing that Unified PE is not a stand-alone curriculum, nor a replacement for adapted physical education services. Unified PE is a practical strategy with the goal of enhancing PE into a model of inclusive physical activity and social connection for all students. This paper is designed to accompany the [SONA Unified Physical Education Playbook](#) (2026, 3rd ed.), which provides a flexible framework, resources, and implementation tools to build more inclusive PE programs across school levels.

Introduction & Background

Unified PE is designed to intentionally bring together a proportional number of students with and without intellectual disabilities (ID) as equals, in a universally-designed physical education setting where all participants earn the same credit for physical education. Unified PE is an instructional strategy supported by Special Olympics and is rooted in the belief that every student should have a meaningful way to participate, lead, and grow.

The concept of Unified PE originated from innovative PE educators who recognized that students with disabilities often lacked meaningful inclusion in general PE, while those solely participating in self-contained adapted physical education settings were missing out on critical social benefits with nondisabled peers. As Unified PE spread, so did a greater demand for consistent guidance, resources and evidence-based practice. In response, SONA worked with some of these innovative PE educators and professors to develop a set of no-cost resources to support schools in bringing students with and without ID together in a general physical education environment. Since launching the first edition of Unified PE Resources in 2017, Special Olympics has continued engaging with educators and evolving the content to help meet their needs. The 3rd edition was released in 2026 as the "[Unified Physical Education Playbook](#)".

Unified PE has seen widespread growth and adoption during this time, which also came with some inconsistencies and misconceptions in understanding and implementation. While Special Olympics plays a large role in training and supporting educators on this instructional strategy, each Unified PE class is ultimately a school district program that is organized to meet the localized needs of their students and staff. The purpose of this paper is to provide greater clarity on the intention, proper use, and vision of Unified PE.

Relationship with Adapted PE, General PE, and the Special Education Process

Unified Physical Education is not a curriculum and is not meant to take the place of existing state or local physical education requirements or adapted physical education (APE) but rather is an additional inclusionary opportunity for students. The addition of Unified PE does not change or replace the critical need for the specially designed instruction that is provided through APE. A student may even concurrently be in Unified PE and a separate small group APE class, if this best meets their individual special education needs.

Just like any other PE course, if the class is called Unified PE or uses the term “physical education” then it’s recommended that a certified PE instructor teach it and that it be aligned with SHAPE America’s National Physical Education Standards and state-specific PE standards. If the class is not taught by a certified PE teacher or students are not receiving PE credit, then it’s recommended not to call it physical education (but it could be a different general elective course, such as “Unified Class”).

Student Placement

Students with disabilities who receive adapted physical education services as a requirement of their Individualized Education Program (IEP), must receive these services in their least restrictive environment (LRE; [NCPEID Guidance for Administrators](#), 2021). While Unified Physical Education is designed to promote the integration of students with and without disabilities in the general education setting, this learning environment may not be appropriate for *all* students with disabilities. This placement is an IEP team decision, not an entire group or class assignment determined by any individual.

Additionally, the availability of Unified Physical Education does not preclude the need for determining individual learning needs in physical education through the special education IEP process. Districts need to a) assess student performance to determine individual need; b) prescribe adapted physical education services in the student’s IEP, if needed; c) develop IEP goals and objectives and monitor their progress; d) document the frequency and duration of PE services and who provides the instruction; and e) deliver adapted physical education services in the LRE, which may or may not be the Unified Physical Education setting. Unified Physical

Education should never be used to replace the “specially designed instruction” in physical education provided through adapted physical education services ([34 CFR §300.39](#)).

Student placement and enrollment in Unified PE should be done intentionally and in partnership with the student, their parent/guardian, and follow the IEP process. These decisions must align with the student’s Section 504 Plan or IEP, when applicable, and comply with federal, state, and local laws and policies governing special education and educational placement practices. Unified PE is not automatically the most appropriate learning environment for every student with a disability. No student should be forced or required to take Unified PE.

A philosophical underpinning of Unified PE is that students without disabilities are meant to be equal classmates who receive high-quality PE instruction from the teacher. In other words, their primary role is not to serve as helpers, peer mentors, or volunteers. Instead, both students with disabilities and their typically developing peers participate as equals, with all gaining benefits such as improved physical literacy, social interaction, and physical well-being.

The impact of this approach is highlighted by Ford and Block (2025) in their study of teacher perspectives of Unified PE. As the authors describe:

While peer support can effectively include students with disabilities in PE, the relationship is often one-directional: peers take on the role of tutor, while students with disabilities become the tutees. This dynamic may unintentionally reinforce a sense of hierarchy, suggesting that students with disabilities are dependent or less capable. In contrast, more balanced peer relationships, where all students contribute and collaborate equally, can foster mutual respect, reciprocal interactions, and greater social acceptance. (section 2, paragraph 2)

Additionally, Special Olympics has heard countless anecdotal stories from students without disabilities who have taken a UPE class and shared how it has positively impacted their lives. Some have shared how it’s the first time they have been comfortable in a PE class and excited to participate in PE because of the safe and accepting atmosphere. Others have been so influenced by this experience that they decided to become PE or special education teachers themselves.

Filling Potential Gaps in General Physical Education

The Ford and Block (2025) study also asked educators who were implementing Unified PE what motivated them to create a (Unified PE) program in their school. As they found, educators highlighted a potential gap that is being filled by adding a Unified PE class:

Participants reported that they chose to create UPE in their schools in large part to solve the problem of students with disabilities not being served appropriately in general PE. This was an interesting finding given that most of the participants in this study were PE teachers themselves, and they were voicing the difficulty they faced in trying to accommodate students with disabilities into their large, general PE classes. At least two participants had advanced training in adapted PE, yet they still felt that trying to include students with disabilities in their general PE programs was very difficult, which resulted in poor experiences for these students. (section 6.1, paragraph 1)

The results go on to say:

UPE's smaller numbers with an equal mix of students with disabilities and peers (usually no more than ten students each) seemed to be more manageable for PE teachers. Additionally, UPE lessons were specifically designed to meet the needs of all students, and coupled with allowing peers to provide extra support as needed, ensured that students with disabilities experienced success and prevented feelings of incompetence. (section 6.1, paragraph 2)

Relationship to Other Special Olympics Initiatives

The Special Olympics Unified Sports® program was officially launched in 1989 and combines people with and without ID for sports training and competition. While Unified PE may be inspired by this highly successful program, the intent is to achieve meaningful, challenging, and beneficial PE for all students. Unified PE should not take the place of extra-curricular Unified Sports or other school-based or community adapted sports programs. Unified PE is not designed as a single-sport training program, but rather a well-rounded physical education experience that promotes alignment with the SHAPE America National PE Standards and state-specific PE standards.

Unified PE is generally implemented as a part of the broader Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools® (UCS) program, which is comprised of 3 components: Unified Sports, inclusive youth leadership, and whole school engagement. Unified PE often fulfills or adds to the Unified Sports experience for students, being implemented in 60% of UCS schools with Unified Sports. While impact data around Unified PE specifically is limited, research and evaluation of UCS has revealed the following benefits for participating students:

- More improvement in perceptions of social inclusion of students with ID compared to students who do not participate (Siperstein et al., 2019).
- More improvements in attitudes toward the inclusion of students with ID in the classroom compared to students who do not participate (Siperstein et al., 2019).

- More visibility of and social interactions with students with ID compared to students who do not participate (Siperstein et al., 2017).
- A 2.2% increase in graduation rates for students with disabilities in UCS schools compared to those in non-UCS schools (Yin et al., 2021).

Conclusions:

Unified PE has the potential to provide educators with a structured and inclusive instructional strategy for all students. It embeds equity, belonging, and leadership into the school community, helping to move students from the margins to the center of school life. The result can lead to healthier habits, increased physically active lifestyles, more confident identities, and inclusive leadership that extend far beyond the classroom.

The results of the Ford and Block (2025) study exemplify these outcomes. As the study revealed:

“Participating in UPE seemed to transform the school experience for students with disabilities, fostering greater acceptance and inclusion among their peers.” (section 5.4.2, paragraph 2)

The authors describe one educator who *“notes that before UPE, students with disabilities were often ‘segregated at their own table, their own little corner,’ leading to unproductive and isolating class time.”* (section 5.4.2, paragraph 2)

And another who adds that *“involvement in UPE outside of class gives students ownership and pride, as they ‘got some swagger now, walking down that hallway,’ which ultimately shows increased self-esteem and peer respect. Collectively, these experiences indicate that UPE improves inclusion and overall sense of belonging for students with disabilities.”* (section 5.4.2, paragraph 2)

Resources and Support

The [Unified PE Playbook](#) from Special Olympics is designed as a flexible resource to help schools build even more inclusive programming opportunities across school levels. This playbook applies principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) into physical education by providing real-world strategies and structured tools that can be customized to meet the needs of diverse school communities (Lieberman et al., 2024). Educators can tailor the tools, examples, and resources to fit their unique context while staying rooted in best practices for inclusion. If you are an educator and think the Unified PE instructional strategy can benefit your students, or if you want to learn more, visit the Unified PE Resource Page and contact your state Special Olympics Program for support.

References

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Contact

- For additional information or follow-up inquiries, please contact:
 - SONA: ucs@specialolympics.help
 - NCPEID: ncpeid@gmail.com
 - SHAPE America: askmembership@shapeamerica.org

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