



Inclusion Through Youth Activation

CASE STATEMENT



Special Olympics
**Unified Champion
Schools**

Table of Contents

4	Overview
6	The Problem
10	The Solution
13	Outcomes
19	Reach
23	Endnotes





Overview

Special Olympics International (SOI) has implemented sports training and athletic competition for people with intellectual disabilities continuously since its founding in 1968. Special Olympics is designed to provide opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities, who have been consistently isolated by society, to participate in sports activities, develop skills and friendships, gain competency, and demonstrate their dignity and their ability to contribute to society. As an organization, SOI knows how powerful a platform sport can be for demonstrating what people with disabilities can achieve. However, while Special Olympics has enjoyed almost universal recognition of its sports programs in the U.S., and high visibility around the world, there is still a general lack of understanding and awareness as to the competence and the range of accomplishments achievable by individuals with intellectual disabilities. The stereotype commonly held, that all people with intellectual disabilities are alike, and that they are unable to learn, live and work as contributing members of the community, is pervasive.

Despite these prevailing stereotypes, change is happening, particularly among youth. Youth are the key to achieving long term societal goals for acceptance of those with differences. Schools are essential to this process. School is where youth spend the majority of their time interacting not just in classrooms and other academic settings, but in a variety of different situations and social contexts. Increasingly, with changes in laws and policies, children with intellectual disabilities are being provided opportunity to engage in the normative life experiences of school, and to learn alongside their peers without disabilities. Despite progress, students with disabilities still face challenges that compromise their social and emotional wellbeing, as the promise of inclusion has not fully been realized; the full participation and acceptance of students with disabilities into the social fabric of school communities remains elusive.¹ Even those students with disabilities who are provided an inclusive educational experience are too often disengaged from many school-based opportunities, and remain socially isolated from their peers without disabilities. For social inclusion to become infused into the school culture and climate, efforts to build awareness, nurture relationships and build expectations for inclusive behavior need to take place not only in classrooms, but also in unstructured and structured environments—within hallways, gyms and lunchrooms.

Over the past nine years, SOI has been actively engaged in the development and implementation of a Unified Schools strategy for promoting and increasing the social inclusion of youth with disabilities in schools K-12 and in their communities. The following document outlines the background and need for this strategy, and the development, continual improvement, revision and refinement of the Unified Champion Schools program in the United States. This includes information on the documented outcomes and impact of the program on schools, and on students with and without intellectual disabilities.



A Vision of Social Inclusion

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

As you walk through the hallways, you see posters, flyers and artwork representing all kinds of clubs, teams and students. The clubs are inclusive, and there are teams and extracurricular opportunities for all.

You see students from the football team high-fiving students from special education classrooms. It is a place of respect where differences are accepted and appreciated. It is a school in which the voices of all students are heard, and all students have the chance to be leaders.

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



The Problem

Young people today face many challenges, from achieving personal and academic success to feeling emotionally and physically healthy and safe. Unfortunately, the typical school and social environment for young people can be fraught with obstacles that hamper their learning and negatively impact their overall happiness and development. These challenges are compounded for some students due to the presence of an intellectual disability. Many students with disabilities experience social isolation and rejection at school, and even victimization in the form of bullying.

Despite all of the well-intended efforts on the part of parents, teachers and administrators, bullying and other mean-spirited actions that isolate and alienate large groups of children continue to be prevalent, representing a serious problem in today's schools.²

- 71% of young people say they have seen bullying in their schools.³
 - » 21% of students ages 12 - 18 surveyed in 2015 reported being bullied during the school year; 13% were made fun of, called names or insulted.⁴
 - » According to a 2010 study on the prevalence of the word "retard," 92% of students in the U.S. have heard the word used to insult others in school.⁵
- 20% of high school students in the U.S. reported being bullied at school in 2015; 16% reported being bullied online.⁶
- Students who experience bullying are at increased risk for depression, anxiety, sleep difficulties, and poor school adjustment.⁷
 - » Students who experience bullying are twice as likely as non-bullied peers to experience negative health effects such as headaches and stomachaches.⁸
 - » A 2009 study of adolescents in the U.S. showed that youth victimized by their peers were 2.4 times more likely to report suicidal ideation and 3.3 times more likely to report a suicide attempt than youth who reported not being bullied.⁹
- The risk and rate of bully victimization is not equal across student groups, with a number of studies indicating that students with disabilities are at greater risk for being victimized than their peers without disabilities.^{10,11}
 - » Only 10 studies have been conducted in the U.S. on the connection between bullying and developmental disabilities, but all of these studies found that children with disabilities were two to three times more likely to be bullied than their peers without disabilities.¹²
 - » When reporting bullying, youth in special education have indicated they were told not to "tattle" almost twice as often as youth not in special education.¹³

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- Students with disabilities are generally more worried about school safety and being injured or harassed by other peers compared to students without disabilities.¹⁴
 - » The National Autistic Society reports that 40% of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), and 60% of children with Asperger's syndrome, have experienced bullying.
 - » Children with ASD are at an increased risk of being bullied and left out by peers; a 2010 Medical University of South Carolina study showed that children ages 8-17 with ASD were more than three times as likely to be bullied as their peers without disabilities.¹⁵

Students with intellectual disabilities rarely experience a school environment that addresses not only their academic needs, but also their social need to make friends, despite decades of work promoting inclusion.

- Notwithstanding changes in law and school policy, the promise of inclusion has not fully been realized. The full participation and acceptance of students with disabilities into the social fabric of the school remains elusive.¹⁶
 - » The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 began the legislative process for equal education rights, followed by the Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1975 [later amended as The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, or IDEA], followed by The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and the 2004 amendments to IDEA.
- Students with intellectual disabilities regularly experience social isolation and rejection within the school setting.¹⁷
 - » In schools that do not have a Unified Champion Schools program, social interactions between students with and without intellectual disabilities are limited, taking place primarily in the hallways (93%).
- Students with intellectual disabilities are less likely than students with any other type of disability to spend time in a regular education environment. A 2007 national study of youth attitudes toward students with intellectual disabilities revealed the following:
 - » While two-thirds of all students with disabilities (61%) spent more than 80% of their school day among their general education peers, for students with intellectual disabilities that rate fell to 17%.¹⁸
 - » Only 38% of all youth said they had a schoolmate with an intellectual disability.
 - » Only 10% of all youth said they had a classmate with an intellectual disability.
 - » Less than 10% of youth nationwide reported having a friend with an intellectual disability.¹⁹

Increased school connectedness is related to educational motivation, classroom engagement, and better attendance. These traits are linked to higher academic achievement and potentially greater success in the workplace.²⁰⁻²² However, without intentionality and intervention, there are few opportunities for social inclusion in schools today, with an atmosphere that too often is unwelcoming and intolerant.

Young people with disabilities are routinely marginalized, isolated and stigmatized, and lack a sense of belonging or school connectedness.

- Students with disabilities participate less in school-sponsored teams, clubs and organizations than their peers without disabilities.²³
- Research suggests that when students with disabilities do not have the chance to be engaged in inclusive activities, they are less likely to feel part of that school.²⁴
- As students progress through school, they become less connected and engaged. Some studies suggest that by high school 40–60% of all students are disengaged from school.²⁵
 - » Only 40% of students in grades 6-12 feel they are a valued member of their school community.²⁶

Despite rising obesity rates, too few students engage in regular physical activity. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services suggests that regular physical activity has a number of benefits to overall physical health such as weight management, and emotional wellbeing of adolescents, including reduced anxiety and stress, and improved self-esteem.²⁷

- According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, only 27% of high school students are participating in the recommended 60 minutes of physical activity per day.²⁸
 - » Only 52% of high school students are attending physical education classes each week, a percentage that is down from 56% more than 10 years ago.
 - » 15% of high school students are rarely participating in any physical activity on a regular basis.
- Research has shown rates of physical activity among students with intellectual disabilities to be 4.5 times lower than rates of physical activity among youth without disabilities.²⁹
- Studies have shown that students with disabilities are less likely to be involved in school-based physical activity, healthy after-school pursuits, and are more likely to engage in sedentary activities such as watching TV.³⁰

Importance of Promoting Physical Activity

The CDC urges schools to find ways to promote physical activity, whether it is through physical education, intramural activities and clubs or through more traditional interscholastic sports programming. The Office of Civil Rights (in the U.S. Department of Education) “Dear Colleague Letter” from January 25, 2013 highlights the importance of providing school-based opportunities for physical activity for students of all abilities. An excerpt from this letter states: “When the interests and abilities of some students with disabilities cannot be as fully and effectively met by the school district’s existing extracurricular athletic program, the school district should create additional opportunities for those students with disabilities.”



While numerous programs and interventions have been developed over the years to address the social isolation and exclusion experienced by students with disabilities, the problems persist. The atmosphere in far too many schools remains unwelcoming and intolerant. Despite decades of work promoting inclusion, students with intellectual disabilities are rarely in a current school environment that addresses their social need to make friends and their physical need to exercise and to be active.

This status quo is unacceptable and an intervention is clearly required to facilitate opportunities for young people with and without intellectual disabilities to engage in physical activity, promote positive attitudes and instill behaviors of acceptance and inclusion for all.



The Solution

With sports as the foundation, the Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools program offers a combination of activities that equip young people with tools and training to create sport, classroom and community experiences that reduce bullying and exclusion, promote healthy activity and interactions, combat stereotypes and stigma, eliminate hurtful language in schools, and engage young people in prosocial activities that lead to more inclusive and accepting attitudes, behaviors and school climate.

The Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools program is supported by an award from the U.S. Office of Special Education Programs at the U.S. Department of Education. Funds in turn are provided to State Special Olympics Programs as they work with schools to create an implementation and sustainability plan for the program that fits within the schools' existing structure and programming, the population of students they serve, and the schools' goals.

As a means for providing inclusive opportunities many schools may not otherwise be able to provide for their students, the Unified Champion Schools program helps to create a school climate where students without disabilities are accepting of their peers with disabilities both in the classroom and in the school overall.

Objectives:

- Create Unified Champion Schools of acceptance where students with disabilities feel welcome and are routinely included in, and feel a part of, all school activities, opportunities and functions.
- Promote positive attitudes and behavior among students without disabilities toward their peers with disabilities.
- Communicate the value of Special Olympics as a community partner that offers school-based programming beneficial to all students.

At its core, the program is not just about including students with disabilities, it's about unifying all students. The Unified Champion Schools program commands a shift from adult-led programming to student-led mobilization and action; from sports as recreation to sports as a catalyst for social inclusion and attitude and behavioral change. It is an approach that positions young people as architects of lasting change and community building, rather than recipients of learning and programming, and adults as allies rather than managers of youth.

The opportunities for one-on-one interactions that occur when youth participate in inclusive sports activities or clubs and lead together, and raise awareness through school-wide activities where peer group influence is leveraged, are at the crux of this Unified Champion Schools program.



Guiding Principles of the Unified Champion Schools Program

- Providing opportunities for students with and without disabilities to interact in meaningful ways that highlight their similarities, rather than accentuate differences, has been valuable in promoting positive attitudes. Sports provide an ideal platform for these types of interactions.³¹
- Programs that successfully improve knowledge and attitudes among youth regarding their peers with a disability should include various types of opportunities that take place over time. These programs should include both adults and students.³²
- There is strong evidence that Special Olympics sports and related programs provide platforms for youth to understand and value their peers with disabilities and empower and activate youth to create opportunities for and with them in sport, friendship, leadership, team building and advocacy.³³

Program Design

Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools are those that employ the Special Olympics Unified Schools strategy to promote social inclusion by fostering inclusive youth leadership, uniting students with and without intellectual disabilities on school sports teams (Special Olympics Unified Sports), and promoting acceptance and understanding through inclusive student clubs and school-wide initiatives.



Core Experiences of the Unified Champion Schools Program

A Unified Champion School implements three specific components, all of which are intertwined in a cohesive effort to increase social inclusion throughout the school. These components are:

- **Inclusive Sports:** A fully inclusive sports or fitness program that combines an approximately equal number of students with and without intellectual disabilities, such as Special Olympics Unified Sports, Interscholastic Unified Sports, Unified PE or Unified Intramurals. These activities occur throughout the school year with the support of an adult coach and include opportunities for competition.
- **Inclusive Youth Leadership:** Students with and without intellectual disabilities working together to lead and plan advocacy, awareness, and other Special Olympics related inclusive activities throughout the school year. Examples include Unified Clubs, inclusive student councils or similar types of inclusive student groups. Clubs are supported by an adult liaison and offer leadership opportunities and/or training for students with and without disabilities.
- **Whole School Awareness and Involvement:** Awareness and education activities that promote inclusion and reach the majority of the school population; all students in the school have opportunities to participate through sustained school-wide activities. Examples include Spread the Word to End the Word (R-Word) Campaigns, Pep Rallies or Fans in the Stands for Unified Sports teams, Respect Campaigns or student fundraising. Ideally, students with and without disabilities are involved with planning and leading awareness events with the support of an adult in the school.



Outcomes

Built on the premise that, to have the greatest impact, change must start with young people, the Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools program inspires a transformation such that the attitudes of the next generation, and their actions toward those with disabilities will be radically different, exponentially more inclusive than in the past. Capitalizing on the strong natural passion young people have for social justice, the Unified Champion Schools program nurtures and focuses their enthusiasm by introducing them to the principles, practices, and experiences that have guided Special Olympics for nearly 50 years.

Special Olympics is raising awareness about students with intellectual disabilities by providing opportunities for these students to get involved in school activities. Opportunities are also being provided for students with and without intellectual disabilities to work together in socially inclusive activities where all students have opportunity for the development of authentic friendships with a broad range of peers in a variety of settings and where students assume leadership roles to positively change their school and community.

The Center for Social Development and Education (CSDE) at the University of Massachusetts Boston carries out an extensive annual evaluation of the Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools program in the U.S.^{34–38} One of CSDE's goals has been to illustrate what the program looks like in practice, and the impact it has on the students and schools involved. Each year, the evaluation has produced findings that have helped guide the developmental course of the Unified Champion Schools program, leading to more clearly defined parameters and guidelines for what constitutes a Unified Champion School.

Unified Champion Schools provide students with and without disabilities the opportunity to form positive social relationships.

Unified Champion Schools provide students with disabilities opportunities to form new social relationships and to make friends — opportunities that are all too rare in the absence of targeted efforts. Through the program, students with and without disabilities are provided multiple and varied socially inclusive opportunities, including the chance for friendship and physical activity.

- 89% of involved teachers/school staff have observed that the Unified Champion Schools program increases opportunities for students with disabilities to get involved in school activities.
- 92% have observed increased opportunities for students with and without disabilities to work together.
- Social interactions happen more often in Unified Champion Schools (78% occurring in hallways), and are more varied, including experiences such as eating lunch together (54%).

**Unified Champion Schools provide students with
the opportunity to develop prosocial skills.**

Students who get involved in inclusive activities have opportunities to develop skills in a wide range of areas, and they are impacted on a personal level by their involvement in the program. In fact, 84% of students generally regard participation in the program as a positive turning point in their lives.

- 72% of involved teachers/school staff believe participation in the Unified Champion Schools program has made a big difference in increasing the confidence of students with disabilities.
- 87% of students have learned how their emotions and attitudes can affect others.
- 87% of students have learned about helping others.
- 85% of students have learned that standing up for something they believe in is the right thing to do.
- 81% of students have learned about the challenges of being a leader.
- 84% of students have become better at sharing responsibility.
- 84% of students have learned the prosocial skills of patience and compromise.
- 65% of students have learned they have things in common with their peers with intellectual disabilities.
- 96% of students have reported they are comfortable interacting with students with intellectual disabilities.
- 97% of graduating students have said that participation in the Unified Champion Schools program has had an impact on their school as a whole.
- 76% of students have said that participation in the Unified Champion Schools program has had an impact on their plans for the future.
 - » 58% of students participating in the program participated for multiple years and 70% said they would participate the following year.
 - » 50% of students who have graduated from a Unified Champion School and attend college remain connected to Special Olympics and the ideals of the Unified Champion Schools program.
 - » 67% of students have indicated that their involvement in the Unified Champion Schools program influenced their choice of major/career.

Unified Champion Schools promote a socially inclusive school climate.

Nearly all teachers/school staff involved in the Unified Champion Schools program believe it has created a more socially inclusive environment overall (93%) that helps students with disabilities become a part of the school community.

- 92% of involved teachers have observed that the program helps raise awareness about students with disabilities in the school.
- 63% of involved school staff feel that students are open to and accepting of differences, and that the program has increased the sense of community in the school.
- 86% of school staff credit the program with reducing bullying and teasing in their schools.
 - » The percentage of students who have heard the r-word drops from 83% to 54% in Unified Champion Schools where an R-word Campaign has been implemented.
- 48% believe there are more opportunities for general and special educators to work together.
- 99% feel the Unified Champion Schools program is valuable for their school as a whole.

Students attending Unified Champion Schools demonstrate improved attitudes and behaviors toward their peers with disabilities — resulting in a more accepting and welcoming environment.

- 71% of administrators have observed that the Unified Champion Schools program impacts the behaviors and attitudes of students without disabilities toward their peers with ID.
- Staff and students from Unified Champion Schools observe a more positive school climate in terms of social and emotional security (feeling safe from verbal abuse, teasing and exclusion), social and civic learning, school connectedness and engagement, and respect for diversity.³⁹
- 45% of students participating in the Unified Champion Schools program become friends with a student with an intellectual disability.
 - » 76% of students involved in Unified Sports or Unified Clubs regularly interact in school with a friend who has an intellectual disability.
 - » 27% of students involved do things outside of school with a friend who has an intellectual disability.

Staff of Unified Champion Schools perceive their school community to have higher levels of:

- Social and emotional security, where students feel safe from verbal abuse, teasing and exclusion.
- Social and civic learning, where students feel supported in the development of social and civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions including effective listening, conflict resolution, self-reflection and emotional regulation, empathy, personal responsibility, and ethical decision making.
- Respect for diversity, where there is mutual respect for individual differences (e.g. gender, race, culture) at all levels of the school—student-student; adult-student; adult-adult and overall norms for tolerance.
- School connectedness and engagement, where there is positive identification with the school and norms for broad participation in school life for students, staff and families.

Unified Champion Schools provide opportunities for students with and without intellectual disabilities to engage in physical activity and sports together, and facilitate opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities to be part of a team, and acquire new skills through inclusive or Unified Sports.⁴⁰ The CSDE's Unified Champion Schools Year 8 Final Report highlighted the following observations pertaining to Unified Sports:

- Students with intellectual disabilities participating in Unified Sports are able to broaden their social circle within their schools and the larger community.
- Unified Sports bring together students who share a common interest in sports.
- Students with disabilities are provided opportunity to pursue a hobby they enjoy while also creating and engaging in meaningful relationships with others.
- For some students with disabilities, participation in Unified Sports is their first experience in a high school extracurricular activity. For others, it is their first experience participating in school sports as a player or teammate rather than as a team manager or assistant.
- Unified Sports provide students with intellectual disabilities a typical high school experience and equal-status membership and participation in school sports.
- Through Unified Sports, students with disabilities improve upon or acquire new athletic and sport-specific skills.
- Students with disabilities have seen newly acquired skills result in new sporting accomplishments.

Evaluation efforts point to the importance of providing multiple and varied socially inclusive opportunities.



It has become increasingly clear that Unified Champion Schools that offer a variety of inclusive activities and experiences are realizing their full potential as leaders in social inclusion, and in impacting their school's climate and students –results that are evident even after only one year of implementation.⁴¹

While participation on Unified Sports teams or in an inclusive student club provides students with and without disabilities the opportunity to make friends and learn about each other, activities that reach the whole school – such as assemblies or awareness campaigns - are equally important in communicating expectations for acceptance and behavior within the school. In fact, the most direct impact on students' perceptions and attitudes toward inclusion in the school are made through these types of activities.⁴² In addition, those students who participate in extracurricular activities perceive the social inclusion of students with all abilities more positively than students who do not participate in extracurricular activities.⁴³ This highlights the importance of opportunities for student engagement outside the classroom as a strategy toward cultivating socially inclusive attitudes.

By offering a combination of inclusive sports and youth leadership options, and a variety of activities that engage the entire student body, the whole school community has a part in building a socially inclusive climate – one that is free from teasing, bullying and the exclusion of any group of students. These changes are becoming apparent as nearly all students (97%), are reporting that the Unified Champion Schools program is changing their school for the better.⁴⁴ In fact, nearly all students (95%) believe that their school should continue the program in the future.



Quotes about Special Olympics Unified Champions Schools

"I feel that, before, many students with disabilities (for the most part) were ignored and/or overlooked. But with it [the Unified Champion Schools program], there are many opportunities for interactions and many friendships formed that wouldn't be there otherwise."

— High School Student

"I've seen other attempts to break down this barrier... I think the whole school from the top down has adopted this kind of model. It's something that I'd like to see replicated in school after school. It's benefited my son and made him hard to handle, in that I have to constantly be asking myself if I'm holding him back, rather than if he's capable of doing the things that he wants to do."

— Parent of a Student with a Disability

"Inclusive school sports is an area of focus for us at the National Federation of High Schools and we feel that Special Olympics Unified Sports is an ideal model for our schools to accomplish this."

— Robert Gardner, NFHS Executive Director

"The Special Olympics [Unified Champion Schools] program is creating a school culture of inclusiveness and appreciation of differences among all students. The students with disabilities feel a part of the school as a whole whereas the students without disabilities are growing and maturing."

— Teacher



Reach

- The Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools program has a presence in more than 5,000 schools across 47 states and the District of Columbia.
- As many as 3.5 million young people are taking part in inclusive experiences through the Unified Champion Schools program.
- During the 2015-2016 school year, more than 257,000 students were provided with opportunities to participate in inclusive sports through Special Olympics Unified Sports.

Keys to Success

After nine years of implementation across the U.S., a number of characteristics that are key to successfully employing the Special Olympics Unified Schools strategy have been identified.⁴⁵ For example, it is important that social inclusion is a purposeful process that is apparent in all aspects of the school, where it is valued and supported among all constituents – students, teachers and administration. Moreover, this approach ensures that social inclusion is viewed as important and that consistent opportunities are provided to engage students in a variety of inclusive activities, which is an important feature of a Unified Champion School. Evaluation efforts continue to reveal the importance of providing multiple and varied socially inclusive opportunities. It is also important that these inclusive activities engage all students as equal status participants and avoid the roles of those being helped and those acting as helpers.

Partnerships

Collaborative education-based partnerships contributing to success of programming nationwide include:

- State Departments of Education
- National Federation of High Schools
- State Interscholastic Athletic Associations
- Association of Middle Level Educators
- National Association of Secondary School Principals
- National Association of Student Councils



Special Olympics New Mexico Youth Athletes



Characteristics of Successful Unified Champion Schools

- 1 Social inclusion is a purposeful process and is woven into the fabric of the school.
- 2 Efforts are student-centered.
- 3 Social inclusion is valued, nurtured and supported across formal and informal settings.
- 4 Consistent opportunities are provided to engage students in developing, implementing, and sustaining a wide range of inclusive activities.
- 5 Shared leadership is embraced, and includes a broad range of stakeholders.
- 6 Leaders are intentionally cultivated beyond a passionate few.
- 7 There is a vision and purpose for social inclusion that is understood and shared by the school community as work that is core to the school/district's mission.
- 8 Social inclusion is about all students being supported in contributing in meaningful ways, not some being the "helped" and others being the "helpers."
- 9 Students, teachers, and administrators value and engage in ongoing reflection to guide continuous improvement.
- 10 Administrative support is concrete, visible, and active at both school and district levels.



National School Recognition Program

Unified Champion Schools achieving higher standards of excellence in programming may earn national recognition through Banner status, which is awarded to schools meeting the following criteria:

- The school has an inclusive school climate and exudes a sense of collaboration, engagement and respect for all members of the student body and staff.
- The school demonstrates commitment to inclusion by fully adopting and synergizing the three core components of the Unified Champion Schools program.
- Unified Champion Schools programming is supported by a leadership team that represents all key stakeholders associated with the school including administration, general and special education teachers, parents and students.
- The school demonstrates that it is self-sustaining or has a sustainability plan in place for longevity of programming.



Social Inclusion Realized

Cactus Shadows High School, Arizona — Unified Champion School

Cactus Shadows has a strong Unified Champion School leadership team made up of administration, special and general education teachers, and students. Before adopting the program at the school, there was a readiness among those in the school to promote inclusion.

As a Unified Champion School, special and general education teachers work together to create quality opportunities for inclusiveness that are supported by the principal. Paraprofessionals working with students in the classrooms have also proven critical to effective inclusion activities.

At Cactus Shadows, students have multiple opportunities to engage in creating a socially inclusive school climate through Student Council, elective courses, Unified Sports and Unified Club. The passion and commitment of students in the Unified Club is contagious, with students describing the experience as, “the best part of my life.” They understand the Unified Club offers a tremendous opportunity for students with and without disabilities to learn and grow together. The school and students are supportive of the Unified Sports program at the school, and those involved recognize that sports is a great way for students with different abilities to join together as teammates. Most importantly, the Unified Champion Schools program has provided opportunities for special and general education students to get to know one another and become friends.

Cactus Shadows High School takes inclusiveness seriously. Shared leadership among adults and students is nurtured to ensure the school is socially inclusive and bullying is reduced. The Unified Champion Schools program has helped to get them there and it is a popular and effective inclusion strategy among staff and students. Special Olympics has motivated and encouraged the administration at the high school to continually seek ways to improve their inclusion effort.

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