



Special Olympics  
**Unified Champion  
Schools®**

## *Basics*

### **Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools®**

#### *One sentence definition*

**Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools®** is a program for schools Pre-K through university that intentionally promotes meaningful social inclusion by bringing together students with and without intellectual disabilities to create accepting school environments, utilizing three interconnected components: Special Olympics Unified Sports®, inclusive youth leadership, and whole school engagement. There are currently nearly 7,500 schools in 49 U.S. states, the District of Columbia and the commonwealth of Puerto Rico.

#### *Full description*

**Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools®** is a program for schools Pre-K through university that intentionally promotes social inclusion by bringing together students with and without intellectual disabilities through sport and education-related activities. The three-component model offers a unique combination of effective activities that equip young people with the knowledge, skills, tools and training to create classrooms and school climates of acceptance, respect, and meaningful inclusion. These are school climates where students with disabilities feel welcome and are routinely included in -- and feel a part of -- all activities, opportunities, and functions.

This is accomplished by implementing Special Olympics Unified Sports®, inclusive youth leadership opportunities (such as clubs, student organizations and leadership teams), and whole school engagement. The program is woven into the fabric of the school community, enhancing existing efforts and providing rich opportunities that empower all students to be the agents of genuine change in their schools, creating socially inclusive environments that support and engage all learners. Unified Champion Schools implementation can vary greatly from school to school, based on the needs, goals, schedules, and other factors unique to each school, but the building blocks and framework are the same.

The Special Olympics Unified Champion School program has expanded to include schools outside of the United States.

### **Three Components of Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools**

**Special Olympics Unified Sports®** in schools is defined as a fully inclusive sports or fitness program that combines an approximately equal number of students with and without intellectual disabilities. Unified Sports may be implemented using one of three styles: competitive; player development; and recreation, which includes Unified PE, Young Athletes, and Unified fitness.

**Inclusive youth leadership** occurs when students with and without intellectual disabilities work together to lead and plan advocacy, awareness, and other inclusive activities throughout the school year.

**Whole school engagement** consists of awareness and education activities that promote inclusion and which reach the majority of the school population.





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### **Categories of Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools (U.S.)**

Within the United States, a Special Olympics Unified Champion School can fall within one of the three categories below. All schools should aim to have a sustainable plan to implement all three components when their community can support it:

**Full-implementation Unified Champion Schools** are those that implement activities from all three core components of the Unified Champion Schools program (Unified Sports, inclusive youth leadership, and whole school engagement).

**Developing Unified Champion Schools** implement Unified Sports and one other component (inclusive youth leadership *or* whole school engagement).

**Emerging Unified Champions Schools** implement either Unified Sports, *or* a combination of inclusive youth leadership and whole school engagement. Schools in this category are encouraged to move to developing status within two years of inception.

### **Special Olympics Unified Schools & Unified Champion Schools outside of the U.S.**

There is robust Unified programming occurring in schools all over the world. These schools can be referred to as either Unified Schools or Unified Champion Schools, depending on the level of implementation.

A **Special Olympics Unified School** is a school offering Special Olympics Unified Sports at least two times within a school year. Unified Sports may be implemented using any of three styles of Unified Sports play: competitive; player development; and recreation, which includes Unified PE, Young Athletes, and Unified fitness. This term is not widely used in the U.S. as all schools are encouraged to be full-implementation Unified Champion Schools.

Schools that demonstrate a higher commitment to creating a more connected environment through all three components of Unified Sports, inclusive youth leadership development, and whole-school engagement for inclusion are designated as a **Unified Champion School**.

### **Meaningful Inclusion**

For students to experience **meaningful inclusion**, a Special Olympics Unified Champion School must thoughtfully implement the three-component model, which fosters co-equal opportunities for students of all abilities to genuinely participate and engage as members of their communities, not as tokens or special cases to be put on a pedestal and artificially honored. The concept of meaningful inclusion promotes understanding of each student's individual value, and the mutual benefits that come from each person's contribution to the relationship. Meaningful inclusion further emphasizes that people with intellectual disabilities should not be treated as individuals that need help and pity, but rather have as much to offer as anyone. Language that emphasizes mentor/mentee, service *for* rather than *with*, and other power imbalances between people with and without intellectual disabilities are discouraged, as words often prescribe behavior.





## **Why Special Olympics?**

Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools fulfill the **mission of Special Olympics** by directly providing students with intellectual disabilities and their whole school community the tools and resources to successfully implement Special Olympics Unified Sports. It has been proven that, combined with the other two components (inclusive youth leadership and whole school engagement), the program provides the most impactful Special Olympics experience in schools.

## **Why does Special Olympics partner with the Department of Education in the U.S.?**

With generous funding from the **U.S. Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) at the U.S. Department of Education**, U.S. Special Olympics programs receive resources to implement the Unified Champion Schools program, which directly supports social and emotional learning and nonacademic indicators required by the Every Student Succeeds Act, and helps meet the following OSEP objectives:

1. Assist states and localities in providing for the education of all children with disabilities
2. Assess the effectiveness of efforts to educate children with disabilities

## **Connection to Social and Emotional Learning**

Evidence and data collected through research and annual evaluations conducted by the Center for Social Development and Education (CSDE) at the University of Massachusetts Boston illustrate that the Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools U.S. program promotes social and emotional learning (SEL) as an outcome by offering opportunities for students with and without intellectual disabilities to socially interact and work together in collaborative, goal-oriented environments. For example, students have reported that they have learned or enhanced SEL competencies in the domains of social awareness and relationship skills because of their participation in Unified Champion Schools activities.

## **National School Recognition Program**

The National School Recognition Program in the U.S. represents a commitment to quality programming, providing a standard of excellence for Unified Champion Schools striving to reach full implementation status. Schools recognized through this program uphold a common set of 10 quality standards developed by a national panel of leaders from Special Olympics and the education community. These standards encompass inclusivity, collaboration, engagement, and respect for all members of the student body and staff. Additionally, schools with this distinction are supported by a leadership team that represents all key stakeholders associated with the school, and demonstrate that they are self-sustaining or have a sustainability plan in place for longevity of programming.

Special Olympics is working outside of the U.S. to create national recognition programs. Each accredited program presents standards of excellence created by country education leaders. These quality standards differ by country to align with their education system.





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### **Data (U.S.)\***

- 96% of school liaisons felt UCS raised awareness about students with ID (68% felt it made a big difference):
- 99% of Unified Champion Schools(UCS) teacher liaisons felt the Unified Champion Schools program is valuable for the school as a whole, 99% felt it is valuable for students with ID, and 99% felt it is valuable for students without ID
- 96% felt UCS increases opportunities for students with and without ID to work together and 69% felt it “made a big difference” in this area
- 95% felt UCS increases the participation of students with ID in school activities (64% felt it made a big difference)
- 90% felt UCS reduces bullying, teasing and use of offensive language in the school (47% felt it made a big difference)
- 96% felt UCS increased the confidence of students with ID (73% felt it made a big difference)
- 95% said that UCS created a more socially inclusive school environment in their school
- 87% felt UCS had an impact on increasing attendance (39% “made a moderate difference,” 48% “made a big difference”), and 79% felt UCS had an impact on decreasing disciplinary referrals for students with ID (42% “made a moderate difference,” 38% “made a big difference”)
- 72% felt UCS had an impact on decreasing dropout (43% “made a moderate difference,” 20% “made a big difference”) – *based on Year 10 data*

### **NON US**

Special Olympics is in the process of working with research partners on collecting data on the impact of our programming around the world.

(\*data from Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools Year 12 (2019-2020) Evaluation conducted by the Center for Social Development and Education at University of Massachusetts Boston)