



Special Olympics **Unified Champion Schools®**



To Build Back Better, Build Back Inclusive

Creating a more inclusive school climate amidst COVID-19

For schools, building back better means building back more inclusive, too.



The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the education of a global generation.

At the peak of the crisis, over a billion students were forced away from their classroom and into social isolation. Where virtual learning was available, it met mixed and often inequitable results. Children have been disconnected from schools that serve as communities and centers for interpersonal growth. The total impact on the academic and social development of the global student body may not be fully realized for years.

While the path back to school is uncertain, the need for concerted effort to support youth on the path back from isolation to inclusion is not. We may not fully know what every school will look like or feel like, but we do know that each will have a renewed need to foster social connection and inclusion amongst a returning student body that is starved for it. In addition to developing classroom-based academic competencies, schools will need to develop students' social competencies better than they ever have before. As others in the [education community](#) have noted, there are opportunities now for schools to return stronger – to 'build back better' in academics, access, and safety. In addition, for schools to build back better, we must also empower them to return as better places for all students experience social inclusion, connectedness, and support.

This challenge has no single answer. But there are tools to create these environments of social inclusion and social development. One tool is the Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools® (UCS) program.

Founded in 1968, Special Olympics is not only the world's largest sport organization for people with disabilities, it is also the largest global platform for teaching the mindset and skillset of inclusion. With programming in over 190 countries and jurisdictions and tens of thousands of schools, Special Olympics is driven by a worldwide, youth-led effort to empower a generation to meet difference with positivity and end the inequity faced by people with intellectual disabilities. In the United States and globally, UCS programming empowers students and educators to create more inclusive school climates with reduced bullying and increased opportunity for social emotional learning and youth leadership development.

After disruptive but necessary closings, Special Olympics is committed to supporting schools to return with more connection and community.

Over more than a decade of implementation and refinement, UCS programming has been used by thousands of schools to foster meaningful

connections between students and to develop skills such as empathy, compassion, and grit. These are needed more than ever to meet the challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic. We invite any school in any country to learn more about UCS and how it can be part of local plans to meet the extraordinary needs of students at this time.

This guide covers some of the most relevant learnings from UCS programming to support educators committed to building their school back better and more inclusive. The rich diversity across school settings worldwide requires that these global concepts be read in the context of local schools and adapted to local culture and circumstances, including local health and safety.

“This is our moment to create school spaces where all are included.”

The COVID-19 pandemic creates deep suffering and anxiety as it disrupts trusted structures and norms. It also creates opportunity for thoughtful action and change to adapt these structures and norms to better meet our shared needs. This is our moment to create school spaces where all are included.



5 Ways to Build Back More Inclusive

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1. With nearly all students facing the challenges of social isolation, create opportunities for social inclusion and community building, especially for those already marginalized. If modifications to student activities or experiences are needed, strive for equitable decisions guided by medical information, not stereotypes.



2. Use lower-risk sports or virtual fitness activities to stay physically active and create teams while modifying higher-risk sport to focus safely on skill development



3. Empower students with and without intellectual disabilities to be leaders for social inclusion



4. Seek ways to integrate social emotional learning, leadership development, and lessons of inclusion into classroom activity, even if co-curricular activity is not available



5. Even if remote, create a safe, supportive, and inclusive school climate that addresses cyberbullying and other negative psychological impacts of COVID-19



As schools and educators navigate the challenges and considerations of operating amidst the COVID-19 pandemic in local communities, recommendations and requirements from public health authorities should be followed closely to reduce transmission of the coronavirus. Alongside these health guidelines, Special Olympics offers these recommendations to support schools in creating and maintaining social inclusion for students with and without intellectual disabilities.

Note: Many of the resources referenced here are accompanied by teacher guides and other tools. While all of the resources are available in English, several are also available in Spanish and select other languages. More translations will be available on a rolling basis, accessible at the links below.

1. Creating opportunities for social inclusion



School reopening is an opportunity to address the social isolation felt by students throughout this crisis and to re-create a sense of school community.

When developing community-building activities and messages, keep in mind students – such as those with intellectual disabilities – who may have been socially excluded prior to the pandemic and particularly isolated by remote learning adaptations. Before COVID-19, about 10% of those 16-24 years old surveyed in the United States indicated that they were ‘always or often lonely’ while 45% of individuals with intellectual disabilities report loneliness. Similar isolation exists in communities around the world.

As student bodies return, it is critical to emphasize that all students – including those who may have been previously excluded – are returning together and building a school community together, whether in-person, remotely, or both. Find ways to demonstrate and communicate the value that marginalized students bring to the school community and ensure that they are socially included. Where education systems place students with and without disabilities in separate schools, commit to taking steps towards inclusion, such as offering opportunities to bring students from mainstream and special education schools together for activities, either in person or virtually. Publicly celebrate students’ acts of inclusion to cultivate a social norm of seeking out and embracing those who are different and socially excluded. For more information on creating socially inclusive school climates, see the [Special Olympics Characteristics of a Socially Inclusive School](#), [Social Inclusion Framework](#), and [Policy Guide for Social Inclusion](#). To bring these frameworks and guides to life, activities to promote social inclusion are in [\(2\)](#), [\(3\)](#), and [\(4\)](#) below.

Depending on local guidelines and school policies, some activities may be prohibited because of risk of viral transmission. Students who are more vulnerable to the effects of COVID-19 may be unable to participate even if activities are not canceled. These decisions are important to maintain the health of the school community. However, there is a risk that students with intellectual disabilities are denied access to activities because of limiting stereotypes of their intellectual disability and not because of any increased vulnerability to COVID-19. Some students with intellectual disabilities do present factors that increase vulnerability to COVID-19 – such as respiratory conditions (e.g., asthma), immune deficiencies, or challenges adhering to physical distancing and/or hand hygiene guidelines – and should prompt caution; many with intellectual disabilities do not. Some students without intellectual disabilities present factors that increase vulnerability to COVID-19; many do not. Decisions should be based on relevant, individual medical information and updated health guidelines, not on stereotypes of intellectual disability. As more is learned about COVID-19, these health guidelines may be updated; for the most current guidance about COVID-19 related to people with disabilities from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (US CDC) and the World Health Organization (WHO), see [here](#) and [here](#).

When student activities are reduced or modified, ensure that all students have equal opportunity and adequate support to participate, including students with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Be mindful of activity modifications that may present accessibility barriers to some students, such as transportation or digital connection requirements, and ensure that all students and parents are adequately informed of any modifications.

2. Using sports to stay physically active



Physical activity and sports remain critical to the health and social development of children.

Sports teach valuable leadership skills and empower students to connect across barriers, such as connecting teammates with and without intellectual disabilities in Special Olympics Unified Sports. While schools may need to impose physical distancing protocols that prevent close-contact sports, alternatives exist, such as focusing on individual skill-development drills or on lower-risk sports, especially if outside. For example, outdoor running, tennis, cycling, or golf can be played while maintaining physical distance between participants. Or drills in skills such as shooting or dribbling can be done in sports like basketball and football (soccer) while minimizing shared equipment. Each of these can be organized to include students with and without intellectual disabilities, creating opportunities for inclusion through sport. For more guidance on reducing the transmission risk for specific sports, check out the [Special Olympics COVID-19 Sport Guides](#). If co-curricular sports are not being offered, consider introducing inclusive sport and fitness into physical education classes. For guidance on how to make fitness activity inclusive, see the Special Olympics Unified Fitness Guide (available in [English](#) and [Spanish](#)); for a particular focus on how to make physical education classes inclusive of students with and without intellectual disability, see the [Special Olympics Unified Physical Education Guide](#).

Sometimes, in-person interaction may be so limited that even modified in-person sports are not feasible. In these circumstances, students can participate in sport remotely through events such as a virtual run/walk race or by sharing videos of themselves performing sport skill challenges, such as juggling a soccer ball or shooting basketball free throws. These remote sport challenges can be



divided into teams that include students with and without intellectual disabilities. Record and share the results for a fun remote competition that can engage a classroom, grade level, or entire school. Virtual activities can also be a fun way to overcome physical barriers that have separated students with and without disabilities from each other, such as being educated in separate schools or separate classes.

It is also important to provide students and families guidance on how to stay physically active while at home. For those who have access to online video, the [Special Olympics School of Strength](#) provides a series of at-home fitness activities for participants of all abilities. For those who do not have access to online video, the [Special Olympics Fit 5 fitness guides](#) are available for download and may also be locally available in print form. These guides provide simple fitness activities for children and families to do together at home to stay physically active and fit.

3. Empowering students to become leaders in social inclusion



□□ **Challenge stereotypes about which youth can be 'leaders' and develop students' skills to lead change together in a way that provides agency and recognizes the contributions of everyone.** □□

Even amidst physical distancing and remote learning, students remain powerful agents of change for social inclusion in their school communities. However, the leadership value of students with intellectual disabilities is often overlooked. Take this opportunity to challenge stereotypes about which youth can be “leaders” and develop students’ skills to lead change together in a way that provides agency and recognizes the contributions of everyone.

If in-person co-curricular activities are permitted, ensure that students with and without intellectual

disabilities have the resources and guidance to join together in a club or student council to make their school community more inclusive. If students with and without intellectual disabilities are educated in separate schools, consider a project that students from two schools can lead together, even if virtually. For ideas on how to create and grow an inclusive student organization, see [How to Create and Sustain a Special Olympics Unified Club](#). If these activities are not possible in person, ensure that students are able to connect with each other virtually for this work to continue remotely. For more information and ideas, see the [Special Olympics Guide to Inclusive Youth Leadership](#).

To reinforce student leaders’ role in creating a more inclusive school community, educators should seek out and celebrate acts of inclusion by students, even if virtual. If students reach out to include those who are left out through platforms such as social media or videoconference, recognize these actions as examples of the school’s culture of inclusion in action, even if in a different form or outside of the school building’s four walls.

4. Integrating social emotional learning and leadership development



As schools manage physical distancing requirements and pressures to maintain academic progress, some may cancel or deprioritize co-curricular activities such as student organizations and sports. These activities, however, create critical opportunities for students to develop social emotional learning skills, leadership skills, and participate in diverse and inclusive teams. To mitigate this loss and to ensure all students have access to these lessons, educators should structure opportunities to bring them into the classroom through intentional focuses on topics such as positive youth development and team building. Resources are available to support classroom educators from the [Collaborative for Social, Academic, and Emotional Learning \(CASEL\)](#).

Educators interested in lesson plans about inclusion can also use the [Special Olympics Visions of a Socially Inclusive Community Mini-Lessons](#). For an interactive classroom activity to prompt discussion about inclusion, educators can also use the [Special Olympics Meaningful Inclusion Tiles](#), available online and with an accompanying [facilitation guide](#). Additionally, resources are available from Special Olympics for physical educators to implement Unified PE, physical education classes that create structured inclusion of those with and without intellectual disabilities, and [Special Olympics Young Athletes Educator Flashcards](#), sport and play activities that support preschool learning outcomes for cognitive and physical development.

5. Creating a safe, supportive and inclusive school climate



While not a new challenge, the expedited transition to online learning has created platforms and opportunities for cyberbullying and harassment between students with and without intellectual disabilities. For more information about bullying as it relates to students with intellectual disabilities, see [Special Olympics and Bullying Prevention](#).

It is important that educators be particularly attentive to the effects of cyberbullying and take action to reduce it. At the same time, it is important to reinforce the school's culture of inclusion.

As students cope with the uncertainty, anxiety, and other mental health impacts posed by the pandemic and the disruption it has caused, it is important that educators be particularly attentive to the effects of cyberbullying and take action to reduce it. At the same time, it is important to reinforce the school's culture of inclusion, even if students are learning remotely. To do this, educators should celebrate acts of inclusion that students do take and also provide resources that promote mindfulness and mental health, such as [Special Olympics Strong Minds](#).

Schools face significant challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic.

But creating an inclusive school and community is still possible.

We encourage educators to use these suggestions and share others that have worked with Special Olympics at UnifiedChampionSchools@specialolympics.org. We also encourage educators to learn more about how the Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools program can be used to enhance social inclusion, even when students with and without intellectual disabilities attend separate schools or are otherwise unable to be physically together. Across the many differences between schools around the world, this moment of challenge presents a shared opportunity to build school communities back better and more inclusive.

What is...



Special Olympics **Unified Champion Schools®**

Unified Champion Schools is a collaborative effort involving Special Olympics, schools, student leaders, educators, and partners in the fields of education and inclusion.

It is a response to the complex challenges faced by students with intellectual disabilities (ID) in school and community environments. While all students can experience a journey through the education system with social and academic pressures and anxieties, the journey is particularly formidable for students with ID as the social and academic divide that exists for the population is often exacerbated with antagonistic behaviors and exclusionary attitudes of peers, leaving little opportunity for development of friendships, and belonging in clubs and sports for impact on mental and physical wellbeing. Unified Champion Schools levels the playing field, eradicating barriers with programming that unifies student bodies, emphasizing diversity and appreciation of uniqueness in the gifts, skills and abilities of all youth toward achievement of individual student and school goals for academic, physical fitness, and social emotional development.

Through sport and positive youth development, Unified Champion Schools programming invites students with and without ID to assert themselves as leaders effecting social justice, unites students in friendship through meaningful inclusion, and shapes inclusive mindsets with far-reaching implications for communities grounded in acceptance and equity. On an individual student level, documented outcomes of programming include educational motivation, classroom engagement, regular school attendance and staying in school, reduced incidence of negative behaviors, and, ultimately, more welcoming and inclusive school climates. These outcomes directly correlate with social emotional learning (SEL), a key area of focus for schools, and one that can be bolstered through Unified Champion Schools programming.

Directly aligned with a global call to action by the United Nations in its [Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities](#), the Unified Champion Schools program addresses a stated purpose to “promote, protect and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities, and to promote respect for their inherent dignity.” The core components of the program foster social inclusion by providing students with and without disabilities opportunities to take on leadership roles in promoting Unified activities in the school and community, and participate in inclusive school-based clubs, inclusive sports and fitness, and sustained school-wide activities.



Origins, Growth, and Impact in the United States

Unified Champion Schools began in 2008 with seed funding from the U.S. Office of Special Education Programs at the U.S. Department of Education as an innovative, youth-driven, education-based program to establish more inclusive school environments for students with ID. Since then, the Unified Champion Schools program has grown into a movement that benefits youth of all abilities and backgrounds, and has proved essential to a comprehensive education experience.



For more detailed information about the challenges being addressed by Unified Champion Schools in the United States, see "Detail: Responding to Challenges in the United States."



As of 2020, there are over 8,000 schools in the United States implementing Unified Champion Schools programming through inclusive sports, inclusive youth leadership development, and engagement of entire school communities in the effort to increase social inclusion, facilitated by the continued support of U.S. Office of Special Education Programs at the U.S. Department of Education. Rigorous evaluation of this programming has found that, for many schools that may not otherwise be able to provide inclusive opportunities for their students, the Unified Champion Schools program helps to create a school climate in which students without disabilities are accepting of their peers with disabilities both in the classroom and in the school overall. 97% of school liaisons felt that the UCS program has created a more socially inclusive school environment and 94% say that UCS has made a big impact in reducing bullying, teasing, and offensive language throughout the school. In fact, one of the most consistently cited personal benefits of participation is the development of cross-disability friendships. Compared to students in schools without UCS, twice as many students who participate in UCS report befriending a peer with ID in school. Perhaps even more importantly, when students without ID describe those friendships, they are rated higher across three very common domains of friendship

including helping, closeness, and security. Both survey and interview data have shown how the program provides students with and without ID the opportunity to work together, and facilitates friendships through that collaboration.

Beyond interpersonal relationships, there are sustained benefits to participation at the individual level. Two-thirds of students who participate in UCS report the acquisition of broadly applicable life skills such as patience and compassion. The impacts of UCS are also not bounded by the time students spend in school as over 50% of students revealed that UCS influenced decisions about their future and career choices including working in the fields of disability and education. Many of these findings highlight the value of the program in providing opportunities for students to gain or enhance social emotional competencies, while having a concrete impact on students' social emotional learning as a whole. Through increased social interactions provided by UCS, students report better social awareness skills, such as how to better work with others and better relationship skills such as making friends with people who are different. This further underscores the role that Special Olympics and the Unified Champion Schools program play in the field of education and the work that is being done toward achievement of desired student outcomes.

Responding to Challenges in the United States



Virtually all young people in schools today face daily obstacles and challenges that can hamper learning and development. From academic pressures and uncertainty about the future, to social isolation and outright bullying, these challenges are even greater for some students due to the presence of a disability. For example, while studies show that 28 percent of students ages 12-18 in the US report being bullied during the school day, research shows that students with ID in the US are two to three times more likely to be victimized. Exacerbating the issue, US students with ID are less likely than students with any other type of disability to spend time in a regular education environment. While two-thirds of all US students with disabilities (61 percent) spend more than 80 percent of their school day among their general education peers, for students with ID, that rate falls to 17 percent. This isolation extends to extracurricular activities as students with ID participate less in school-sponsored sports, clubs and organizations than their peers without disabilities.

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The outcomes of bullying and exclusion can be violent and tragic. Students who experience bullying are at increased risk for depression, anxiety, sleep difficulties, and poor school adjustment. These experiences contribute to disengagement and a lack of school connectedness, factors that can lead to substance abuse, school absenteeism, violence, and engagement in risky behaviors. Conversely, prosocial activities experienced by students with and without ID through inclusive sports, inclusive youth leadership, and whole school engagement components of the Unified Champion Schools program, lead to improved behavior, better educational outcomes, and more positive school climate— factors that have been linked to educational motivation, classroom engagement, regular school attendance and staying in school, and decreased rates of substance abuse, violence, and risky behaviors.

The lack of opportunity for sports participation presents additional health risks for young people, and students with ID are particularly affected. While childhood obesity rates among the general population in the US continue to rise, with more than one third of children and adolescents overweight or obese, the most recent estimates suggest that the incidence of obesity among children with intellectual or learning disabilities in the US is 38 percent higher by comparison. With sports as the foundation, the Unified Champion Schools program not only encompasses the physical benefits of sport in combating the overweight obesity epidemic, but also the beneficial effects on cognition, and by extension, academic performance.

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Global Expansion and Adaptation



From its origins in the United States, Unified Champion Schools programming continues to grow around the world.

Estimates from earlier in the decade suggested that in developing countries, [up to 90% of school-aged children with disabilities were not in school at all](#); while progress has been made, there are fears that it will be undone by long-term impacts of COVID-19. Of children with ID who do attend school, many are educated in environments segregated from their non-disabled peers. These factors combine to significantly reduce opportunities for social inclusion of children – and, as they grow, adults – with ID. While schools around the world differ significantly, there is a shared global importance to improve the social inclusion for students and school-aged children with ID and increase opportunities for all students to learn the skills of inclusion and other social emotional lessons taught by Unified Champion Schools programming. The UCS model provides flexibility within a framework. These three components can be adapted to meet education systems where they are and assist them in addressing attitude barriers as they move towards inclusion. A groundbreaking partnership with the [Stavros Niarchos Foundation](#), support from global philanthropists such as Ray & Stephanie Lane, and collaboration with many other global and local partners have driven the expansion of inclusive, school-based programming with the goal of bringing the 3-component Unified Champion School programming to as many communities as possible.

The Unified Champion Schools program reached critical milestones in 2019, when the United Arab Emirates became the first country in the world to [commit to implementing the programming in 100% of its government schools](#), and [in 2020 when His Highness Sheikh Mohamed Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and Deputy Supreme Commander of the United Arab Emirates Armed Forces, provided support to further accelerate the global growth of Unified Champion Schools](#) and bring its impact to every corner of the world. As of 2020, there are schools participating in Unified Champion Schools programming in 140 countries; in each community, the programming is adapted to meet local circumstances.

The impact of the Unified Champion Schools program is profound, providing rich opportunities that yield optimum school climate conditions in which diversity is valued, equity is demanded, and every student is an engaged and contributing member. The resulting change ignited across all levels of the education experience, from elementary school through university, validates the work of Special Olympics in partnership with all our supporters, and youth and educators worldwide.



Unified Champion Schools around the globe

In **China**, special education and general education schools partner to implement Unified Champion School programming, creating connections between otherwise separated peers with and without ID.



In **Kenya**, Special Olympics has partnered with the Kenya Ministry of Education to deploy Unified Champion School programming as a tool to reach the country's goals of inclusive schools.

In **Brazil**, Special Olympics has partnered with kindergartens and preschools in areas with high rates of microcephaly caused by the Zika virus to implement inclusive early childhood development programs as part of Unified Champion Schools.



Moving Forward: COVID-19 and Beyond



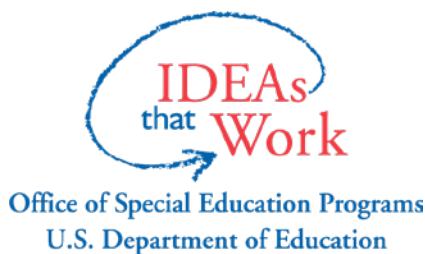
Across countries and cultures, the COVID-19 pandemic has given a clear reminder that school is much more than a place to acquire knowledge.

For young people, it is a place of needed social connection and development. We can see the importance of these connections – of being meaningfully included in the social fabric of a school community – in their absence. COVID-19 has disrupted our most familiar school norms and structures. As we piece school communities back together, we have the opportunity to examine whether they did truly include all of their students and, if not, to deploy any and all available tools to make them more inclusive of those who have been marginalized. The Unified Champion School program can help. The need to overcome social isolation and exclusion with connection and inclusion has never been greater. Special Olympics is committed to supporting schools, educators, and students to meet this need. Together, we can face this unprecedented moment with the tools and resilience to raise our schools to new levels of social connection and inclusion for all students. Together, we can meet this part of the challenge created by COVID-19 and, in this way, build our schools back better.



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