



INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW



WHY DO WE NEED MIDDLE LEVEL SCHOOLS TO BE SOCIALLY INCLUSIVE ?

Creating an inclusive, educational atmosphere that ensures every middle school student becomes a healthy, productive and ethical individual is a central focus of middle grades education. Accomplishing this requires intentional planning and implementation, strong collaborations and initiatives that provide equitable and quality opportunities for all.

Every day, millions of diverse, rapidly changing 10 - to - 15-year-olds make critical and complex life choices and form the attitudes, values and dispositions that will direct their behavior as adults. They deserve an education that will enhance their healthy growth as lifelong learners, ethical and democratic citizens, and increasingly competent, self-sufficient individuals who are optimistic about the future and prepared to succeed in our ever-changing world. (Edwards, 2015, p. 12)

Successfully meeting the needs of all students depends largely on the school climate, which affects every aspect of students' school experiences. This ranges from their social and emotional well-being to the overall quality of their educational experiences. A positive school climate creates the necessary conditions where diversity is valued, equity is demanded, and every student is a contributing member.

As reported by Kenneth Brighton (2007) in *Coming of Age: The Education and Development of Young Adolescents*, "Middle school students simply learn best in an atmosphere where their social and emotional needs are addressed." A key aspect of an effective school climate is the way in which students with intellectual disabilities are provided opportunities to engage in the normal life experiences of school. The sense of belonging or connectedness within the school is particularly important for students with intellectual disabilities and is associated with several important educational outcomes, including regular school attendance (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009a).

Yet, even in middle level schools with policies and procedures that provide for academic and physical inclusion, students with intellectual disabilities often are disengaged from school-based, social opportunities. Students with disabilities tend to participate less in school-sponsored sports teams, clubs and extracurricular or exploratory opportunities than their peers without disabilities, often experiencing social isolation within the school setting (Coster et. al., 2013).

This isolation manifests itself in negative ways across the school setting. Consider the following:

- Bullying and other mean-spirited actions can have violent and tragic outcomes: **71% of young people say they have seen bullying in their schools** (Bradshaw, Sawyer, & O'Brennan, 2007). Students with disabilities are at greater risk for being victimized than their peers without disabilities (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009b; Rose, Espelage, & Monda-Amaya, 2009).
- **Verbal and social bullying represent the most prevalent types of bullying during the middle grades**, with the highest rates of occurrence reported among sixth graders (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009a).
- **If the norms in a peer group support socially irresponsible behavior (e.g., bullying), students are less likely to be involved in school activities**: and their sense of connectedness to school can suffer, along with achievement levels and health behaviors (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009a).

This can be turned around with attention to social inclusion, and the team structure in middle level schools can help all students to be included through the family-type focus of these teams.



HOW DOES SPECIAL OLYMPICS UNIFIED CHAMPION SCHOOLS IMPACT YOUTH ?

"It's a lot of fun. You get to meet a lot of new people and it's just a fun experience that you get to hang out with them on like a regular school day. You get to know them better. If you see them in the hallway, you say, 'hi.' Instead of last year, I didn't really know them. So I just said, 'hi,' but now I can say, 'Hey [name]. Hey, [name],' or all that."

-Unified Champion School Student without ID

"Unified Champion Schools is something I wish I had been a part of when I was in school. Just seeing the growth in our athletes and partners is eye opening. The skills they are learning now by creating such an inclusive environment will continue to help them in their day-to-day lives through adulthood, so the fact they are learning it as middle schoolers is fantastic."

-Unified Champion School Middle School Administrator

"As a teacher, it is the best decision our school has made to foster inclusion and acceptance. Our athletes and partners do everything together, and the friendships will last a lifetime"

-Unified Champion School Middle School Teacher

The Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools program promotes a socially inclusive school climate where acceptance, respect and human dignity for all students are the norm. As the data below demonstrate, a Unified Champion School equitably supports students with and without intellectual disabilities and promotes meaningful opportunities for every student to contribute.

Within Unified Champion Schools, students without disabilities hold more positive attitudes toward their peers with intellectual disabilities, are more tolerant, and realize the impact their words and actions have on others (Center for Social Development and Education, 2012, 2013, 2014).

Socially inclusive school and classroom climates are more evident where students with disabilities feel welcome and are routinely included in, and feel they are a valued part of, all activities, opportunities and functions (Brighton, 2007).

Extensive evaluation of the Unified Champion Schools program has revealed the following positive impacts (U.S. Department of Education, 2013; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009a; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008):

84%

84% of students generally regard the experiences they've had with a **Unified Champion School as a positive turning point in their lives.**

87%

87% of students learn that **standing up** for something they **believe is the right thing to do.**

Developing Pro-social skills

Students who are engaged in programming develop valuable pro-social skills. The majority of schools report that students learn about helping others (87%) and how their emotions and attitudes can affect others (85%).

82%

82% of students feel that they are able to change their schools for the better.

WHAT IS THE SPECIAL OLYMPICS UNIFIED CHAMPION SCHOOLS PROGRAM ?

Since its founding, Special Olympics has provided quality sports opportunities for individuals with intellectual disabilities across the globe. Today, Special Olympics serves as a driving force for social inclusion, with the vision of creating a world where people with intellectual disabilities are welcomed in their communities and join with others to learn, work, compete and play, having the same rights and opportunities as others.

Essential to this work is a focus on youth. Special Olympics views youth as powerful and effective advocates, open-minded to new things, and as having the courage of conviction to step up and defend their beliefs. For this reason, Special Olympics finds that young people are some of the most powerful and effective advocates on behalf of acceptance.

According to the research of Dr. Peter Scales of the Search Institute, this point is true for students in middle grades schools. **The characteristics of young adolescents identify that these youth are generally idealistic, desiring to make the world a better place and to make meaningful contributions to causes larger than themselves.** They also value direct experiences in a participatory democracy (Association for Middle Level Education, 2010).

Since 2008, Special Olympics has been actively engaged in the development and implementation of a school-based strategy, supported and endorsed by the U.S. Office of Special Education Programs at the U.S. Department of Education, to promote and increase the social inclusion of youth with intellectual disabilities in schools across the country.

The Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools program is aimed at promoting social inclusion through intentionally planned and implemented activities. With sports as the foundation, the three-component model offers a unique combination of effective activities that equip young people with the tools and training necessary to create classroom and school climates of acceptance. These are school climates where ALL students feel welcome and are routinely included in, and feel a part of, all activities and events.



Youth and adults working collaboratively in an inclusive setting create socially inclusive schools. Unified Champion Schools promote a school climate that:

- Is free from bullying and exclusion.
- Combats stereotypes and negative attitudes.
- Eliminates hurtful language.
- Promotes healthy activity and interactions.
- Is welcoming and values the engagement of all students.

Within Unified Champion Schools:

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



According to *This We Believe*, the Association for Middle Level Education's landmark position paper (2009), successful middle grades schools are characterized by the active engagement of students and teachers. It could not be otherwise, for everything that is known about the nature of young adolescents and the principles of learning points to the reality that the most successful learning strategies are ones that involve each student personally. ...Successful middle grades practices purposefully empower young adolescents to assume this role, one that includes self-advocacy.

The Unified Champion Schools program addresses the social-emotional developmental needs of young adolescents to belong to a peer group while welcoming and benefitting from positive relationships with adults. At its core, the Unified Champion Schools program is about unifying all students; student and teacher collaboration where students learn to be leaders; and sports as a catalyst for social inclusion and change.

Students in the middle grades have the ability to perceive deep truths and are making decisions that will affect the way they live the rest of their lives. This transitional time between childhood and adulthood is the prime time to introduce students to important concepts, such as the need to seek social justice. (McHugh, Reedy, & Yehle, 2017)

Social inclusion can be a strong basis for an interdisciplinary unit.



What are the connections between middle level schools and Unified Champion Schools?



How can we expect students to develop leadership and interpersonal skills and put them into action if opportunities are not provided within schools for students to interact with, support, and grow to know and appreciate fellow students of diverse abilities, characteristics and backgrounds? Middle level experts assert that effective middle level schools must provide programs and opportunities that support this growth.

The Association for Middle Level Education's *This We Believe* affirms that an education for young adolescents must be:

- Developmentally responsive.
- Challenging.
- Empowering.
- Equitable.

The National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform identifies the following criteria for high-performing middle schools:

- Academically Excellent.
- Developmentally Responsive.
- Socially Equitable.

Further, the National Forum believes that to achieve the high level of performance identified above, middle schools must establish norms, structures and organizational arrangements to support movement toward excellence.

The focus on schools that are socially equitable provides a direct correlation between research on effective middle schools and Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools. The document, "Middle Level Schools and Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools" provides a crosswalk between the characteristics of middle level schools, middle level concepts, and the elements of Unified Champion Schools. Find the document in the Resources section at the end of the Playbook.

HOW DOES THE UNIFIED CHAMPION SCHOOLS PROGRAM SUPPORT CURRENT EDUCATION INITIATIVES?

The activities of the Unified Champion Schools program enhance a number of key educational initiatives in important and relevant ways. Those found below are frequently a part of school improvement plans and activities as school staff seek to increase student success. If your school is already focusing on any of the following, becoming a Unified Champion School will amplify and enhance your current emphasis.

Core Content and 21st Century Skills

The resources and activities provided through the Unified Champion Schools program **allow students to gain core content and 21st century skills across the curriculum.** Deep understandings and abilities to use acquired skills develop when students are provided experiences that draw on prior knowledge and utilize higher-order thinking skills as they apply their learning to improve the school environment. Critical thinking and problem solving, communication and collaboration, social and cross-cultural skills, and leadership and personal responsibility are all 21st Century Skills that are reflected and reinforced through implementation of the Unified Champion Schools program.

A Positive, Caring, Equitable School Climate

Context matters. There is growing research demonstrating that students perform better academically, socially and emotionally when they are meaningfully engaged, contributing members of a school **with a positive, caring and equitable school climate. A successful middle level school is inviting, safe, inclusive and supportive of all and developmentally responsive, challenging, empowering and equitable (Association for Middle Level Education, 2010).** A school that expects, encourages and supports inclusive practices is a critical underpinning to the establishment of an equitable learning environment for all students. This has been shown to result in positive impacts on student performance, and is supported by the Unified Champion Schools program.

Behavior Interventions and Supports

Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) are being used to better teach and reinforce expected behaviors throughout the school. The Unified Champion Schools program supports this work across all school settings by **providing meaningful opportunities for students to work and learn together in ways that support all learners and create an equitable, caring environment for all.**

The cognitive-intellectual developmental needs of young adolescents include a preference for interaction with peers during learning activities. Culturally responsive educational strategies, differentiated instruction and positive behavioral supports are just some of the bedrock practices employed in inclusive schools. Inclusive education should be a universal commitment and a core value to ensure equitable access and success for students and adults at all three tiers of a PBIS school-wide system.

School Connectedness

School connectedness is a characteristic of school culture in which **students have meaningful relationships with adults within the school, are engaged in school, and feel a sense of belonging in the school.** It is an important factor in student success and well-being. Students who feel they belong and are valued contributors to the community are more likely to attend school, have higher grades and test scores, and are less likely to engage in risky behaviors and harmful activities such as bullying.

Practices that promote school connectedness are **incorporated into the Unified Champion Schools program by providing opportunities for all students to engage in meaningful school-based activities. One aspect of the middle level program is advisory in which an adult advisor meets with a group of students to provide academic and social-emotional mentorship; enhance personalization; and facilitate a peer community of learners, which leads to a stronger connection to the school.**



SANITARY INSPECTION REPORT
SATISFACTORY

Carly Stranges

Troy De

Calvin Arnes

Jada Plank

Special Olympics
New Jersey

Megan

Amy Lopez

Rebekah Al

NEW JERSEY
PLAYED

HOW DOES THE UNIFIED CHAMPION SCHOOLS PROGRAM SUPPORT THE DEVELOPMENTAL NEEDS OF YOUNG ADOLESCENTS?

“Honestly, it’s been the highlight of my year. I’ve gotten to know so many people. And I feel like it’s helped me as a person. And I’ve gotten more patient. I’ve gotten more understanding. And I’ve broadened my education of this subject of disabilities and special needs. And I’ve become a certified volunteer at a local Down syndrome achievement center. And I’ve done an eight-week volunteering thing there. And I got like 16 hours in, which is really cool.”

– Unified Champion School Student Without ID

Individual youth between the ages of 10 and 15 reflect or experience various rates and times of development. However, as a group they reflect important developmental characteristics that have implications for their education.

The Unified Champion Schools program supports the development of young adolescents in a variety of ways. With the emphasis on Unified Sports and wellness, the Unified Champion Schools program addresses the following physical characteristics. Young adolescents:

- Undergo bodily changes that may cause awkward, uncoordinated movements.
- Need daily physical activity because of increased energy, and, not actively engaged, often lack fitness.
- Need to release energy, often resulting in sudden, apparently meaningless outbursts of energy.

Young adolescents struggle with the issues of right and wrong, and the foundation of the Unified Champion Schools program supports youth in a way that encourages them to make moral/ethical decisions regarding interactions with students who have intellectual disabilities. Young adolescents:

- Begin to make principled choices about how to treat one another.
- Develop their own personal values; however, they usually embrace the values of parents or key adults.
- Tend to be idealistic and possess a strong sense of fairness.
- Struggle with making sound moral and ethical choices.

While Unified Champion Schools is generally not considered an academic program, it addresses some of the intellectual characteristics of young adolescents through decision-making and leadership opportunities. These youth:

- Need to have learning connected to real life situations.
- Are inquisitive about adults and are keen observers of them.
- Begin to think critically about the world around them.
- Move from concrete to abstract thinking.
- Prefer active to passive learning.

Social and emotional learning provides a strong undergirding of Unified Champion Schools. It is a significant, developmental characteristic of young adolescents who:

- Are very sensitive to feedback and criticism.
- Tend to be self-conscious; seek acceptance.
- Are socially vulnerable as they are developing their beliefs, attitudes and values.
- Seek to become more independent.
- Are highly sensitive to personal criticism and embarrass easily.
- Desire recognition for their positive efforts and achievements.

As you implement the Unified Champion Schools program, be aware of how you are addressing the developmental needs of young adolescents. Focus on these needs as you identify activities and growth opportunities. More information on the developmental characteristics of young adolescents can be found in the Association for Middle Level Education’s foundational

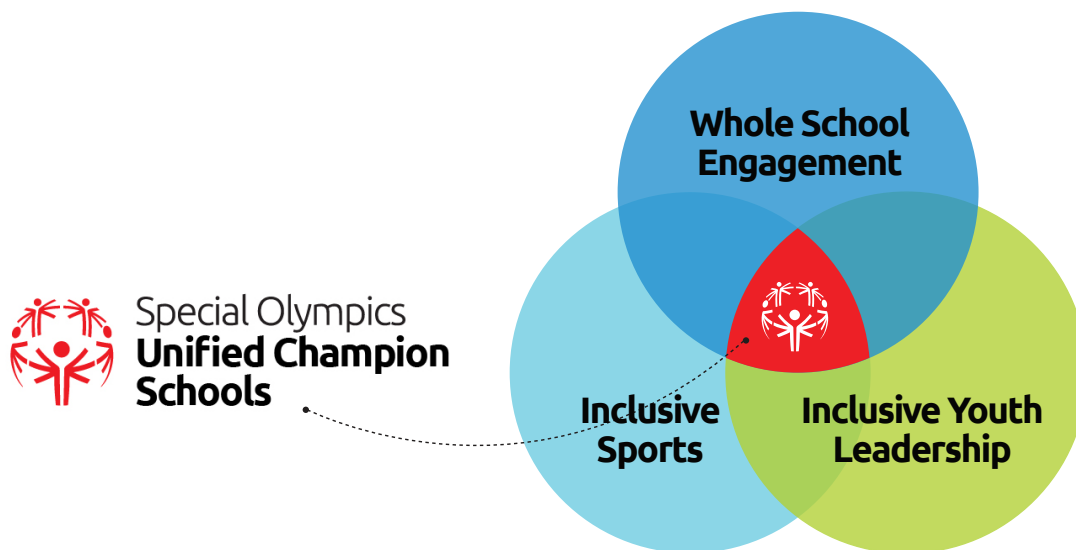


Wanted:
RESPECT

Be A Fan
UNITY

HOW DOES THE SPECIAL OLYMPICS UNIFIED CHAMPION SCHOOLS PROGRAM WORK?

The Unified Champion Schools Program is designed to be woven into the fabric of the school, enhancing current efforts and providing rich opportunities that lead to the creation of a socially inclusive middle level school that supports and engages all learners. What a Unified Champion School looks like can vary greatly from school to school (or team to team), based on the needs, goals, schedules and other factors unique to each middle level school, but the basic building blocks remain the same.



A Unified Champion School implements **three specific components, all of which are best integrated with the others in a cohesive effort to increase social inclusion throughout the school.** Just as an integrated curriculum in middle level schools has long been recognized as a foundation for effective learning, research on Unified Champion Schools has identified that schools in which all three components are interconnected and implemented are those that become socially inclusive to a higher degree.

The components of Unified Champion Schools are:

- **Whole School Awareness and Involvement:** awareness and education activities that promote inclusion and reach the majority of the school population. All students have opportunities to participate through team or school-wide activities, and students with and without intellectual disabilities are involved with planning and leading awareness events with the support of an adult. Examples include Spread the Word to End the Word Campaigns (R-word), pep rallies or Fans in the Stands for Unified Sports teams, or a Unified Sports Festival.
- **Inclusive Youth Leadership:** students with and without intellectual disabilities working together to lead and plan advocacy, awareness and inclusive activities throughout the school year. Examples include Unified Clubs, leadership classes, inclusive Student Councils, National Junior Honor Society, or similar types of inclusive student groups. The clubs are supported by an adult liaison and offer leadership opportunities or training for students with and without intellectual disabilities.
- **Inclusive Sports:** a fully inclusive sports or fitness program that combines an approximately equal number of students with and without intellectual disabilities. Examples include Unified Sports, Unified PE or fitness, and Unified intramurals. These activities occur throughout the school year with the support of an adult coach and may include opportunities for competition.

DEFINITION OF A SPECIAL OLYMPICS UNIFIED CHAMPION SCHOOL

“I really didn’t know what Unified Champion Schools was when I became my school liaison, but once I fully understood the goals and the initiatives, I was all in. From the time we started, the change in our school has been incredible. Our entire culture is all about inclusion.”

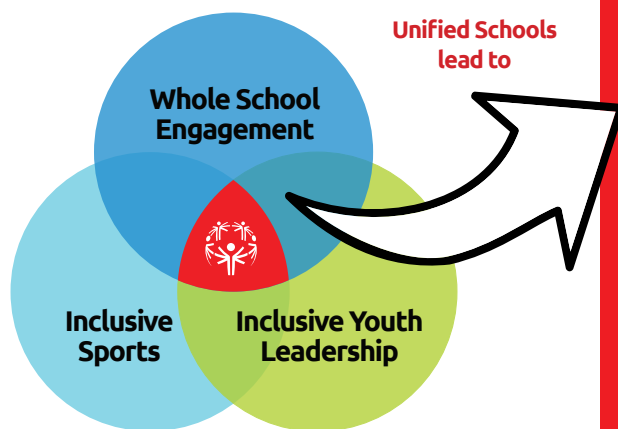
- Unified Champion School Educator

A Special Olympics Unified Champion School has an inclusive school climate and exudes a sense of collaboration, engagement and respect for all members of the student body and staff. A Unified Champion School is one that has demonstrated commitment to inclusion by adopting the three core components of the program: Special Olympics Unified Sports, inclusive youth leadership and whole school engagement.

While the components are listed individually, they should be implemented in coordination with each other and supported by a leadership team composed of representatives from all areas of the school, including students, teachers, administrators and parents. Research has proven that when all three components are incorporated, there is a deeper impact on the individual participants and the overall culture and climate of the school.

As the graphic below illustrates, incorporating aspects of the three Unified Champion Schools components provides unique and engaging learning activities for students, while enhancing current social inclusion efforts. While every activity might not incorporate all three components, school staff should strive for each activity to integrate at least two of the components. Just as interdisciplinary teaching engages multiple disciplines within a unit of study, the focus is to combine aspects of the three components to increase student understanding. Throughout the process of implementing the activities, it is important to offer multiple opportunities for all students to be engaged in a variety of ways.

The figure below is an example of the three components of a Unified Champion Schools program in action.



As part of the exploratory program, students with and without intellectual disabilities organize a Unified walking club in a whole school engagement activity focused on healthy living. They make accommodations to ensure all students have an equitable opportunity to participate.

The club meets weekly and asks members to get friends and family members to make pledges to walk a set number of miles each week, and they challenge another middle school in the district to participate as added incentive.

The students expand the focus on healthy activities to include a neighboring elementary school where the middle level school students engage the younger students as walkers in a whole school engagement activity at the elementary school. They also design and teach inclusive activities during physical education classes at the elementary school, incorporating games that enhance physical activity as part of a service-learning project.



PICTURE OF AN INCLUSIVE MIDDLE SCHOOL

There it stands, Success for All Middle School! As you enter the campus you can tell there is something special about this school. The sign outside welcomes everyone and invites the community to an upcoming Unified event—**“Join Us for Our Unified Sports Festival This Saturday.”**

As you walk through the front door of the school, the positive atmosphere speaks volumes. Students and adults are greeting each other and chatting, welcoming visitors to the school with a smile. The walls and bulletin boards are filled with diverse student work and posters highlighting inclusive club activities and inclusive exploratory programs. A banner stating, “Special Olympics Unified Champion School,” has a special place in the entry hall.

All visitors are escorted around the school by an inclusive pair of school ambassadors—one student with and one

without an intellectual disability. The Ambassador Program is a program started by the Inclusive Leadership Team. The obviously proud students eagerly walk you through the hallways and explain how the interdisciplinary teams have different social inclusion celebrations.

It becomes obvious that one team is having a door-decorating contest. Groups of students have taken over their hallway to create doors that support the school’s R-word campaign. Watching them work, you can see how students with and without intellectual disabilities work together to share ideas as they complete their door.

With great pride, our guides explain that each team focuses on specific inclusion activities throughout the year and that the Unified Club has become the most popular exploratory activity in the school. There is a club for each interdisciplinary team so that everyone has the opportunity to be actively engaged.

The students share that last year the Unified Club for eighth grade teams organized pep rallies for every intramural and interscholastic competition with a Fans in the Stands cheering section at all Unified games. The different teams also created a Wall of Fame to recognize Special Olympics athletes participating in regional or state competitions.

The members of the Unified Club for the seventh grade teams focused on making the lunchroom a welcoming place by ensuring the walls were filled with a diverse collection of art and announcements of inclusive events. They organized activities to get students interacting, and arranged for student volunteers to welcome students and visitors as they entered the cafeteria. They also took charge of seating options for their teams to make sure that everyone had a place to sit and someone with whom to talk.

The sixth grade team worked on a presentation to their feeder elementary schools as part of a service-learning project. Designed to support fifth graders transitioning from elementary school, the presentation addressed social inclusion opportunities that would be available to them in middle school. As student opportunities for inclusive engagement are not limited to the Unified Club, the Student Council assisted with these presentations. Additionally, council members petitioned the principal and their teacher sponsor for a revision of the selection process and membership guidelines to ensure that the Student Council was inclusive, and accurately reflective of the entire student body.

As you continue your tour through Success for All Middle School, you peek into an advisor-advisee class and notice that the teacher is using a lesson from Special Olympics Activities and Lessons. Students are reacting to a quote from Harry Potter. In talking with the teacher, you learn that the students will then react to a film clip from the movie, "The Ringer." She says that social inclusion has become an ongoing topic for discussion, and the students are gaining a greater understanding about the importance of students being engaged in the school.

As you walk by the gymnasium, you notice an inclusive physical education class where students are participating on Unified teams. Your tour guides enthusiastically tell you about Unified Sports and explain that they both play on a team. In addition to the ongoing bocce tournaments that take place during lunch, there are both Unified basketball and soccer teams.

Because of the success and popularity of Unified Sports, the students and coaches plan to offer additional sports next year. Your school guides explain how the members of the Unified Club were instrumental in getting Unified Sports started at the school and how they continually work to engage more students on the teams.

Before you leave the school, the principal invites you to attend the Inclusive Leadership Team meeting. As you sit in the meeting and listen to discussions about future assemblies, ways to ensure that new students are paired up with other students who serve as their peer buddies, and specifics about this year's R-word campaign, it becomes obvious that everyone is committed to making Success for All Middle School a truly inclusive school. It is also clear that the students are engaged in the Leadership Team, leading discussions and making suggestions. The principal also explains how each interdisciplinary team has its own inclusive leadership team comprised of both students and adults to address the specific needs on that team.

While the Leadership Team is pleased with the direction their school is taking, they continue to identify ways to improve the school climate. Last year the Leadership Team completed the Characteristics of Socially Inclusive Schools Assessment and Social Inclusion Scale to gain a better understanding of the school climate in terms of its level of inclusion. They used this information to engage others to find ways to make the school more socially inclusive. They were so pleased with the guidance from the first two assessments, the Leadership Team decided to use the Social Inclusion Rubric in their process of addressing continuous improvement because it provides clear pictures of what the school looks like as they move along the continuum.

As you exit Success for All Middle School, you leave with a smile on your face and many stories to share with others. It is clear that this is a school that fully embraces social inclusion and is creating a school environment where all students are engaged and successful. It is truly a Unified Champion School!



EXAMPLES OF SPECIAL OLYMPICS UNIFIED CHAMPION SCHOOLS

Unified Champion Schools Success Stories

“I loved being able to show them that some people may be different, but we’re all different in our own ways, and that we can all come together and still be friends, and be friends through differences.”

– Unified Champion School Student Without ID

You have read about the three components that make up a Unified Champion School. An important aspect of the program is that the components can be configured in a variety of ways, reflecting the characteristics of the school and specific needs and ideas of the students. In other areas of the Playbook, possible activities are identified to assist with the initial implementation of supporting strategies.

However, implementation of the Unified Champion Schools program can vary from school to school, and it will likely expand and change over time as a school strives to meet its strategic goals of social inclusion. The longer the students and adults work to create a tolerant, supportive and respectful school climate, the more ideas they will identify to make their school more inclusive. So, a hundred or a thousand schools can be designated Unified Champion Schools, but each can look slightly different as staff and students work to meet the specific needs of the school and the students.

The following descriptions reflect how students and adults at middle level schools across the country have implemented the Unified Champion Schools program in powerful and effective ways. While each might look a little different, all are committed, socially inclusive middle schools.

Mesa Middle School

Castle Rock, Colorado



Unified Champion Schools at Mesa Middle School was first introduced in October 2011. At the time, we were the second middle school in Colorado (first in our district), to become a part of this incredible program. Since the start of Unified Champion Schools program, the climate and culture of our school and community have greatly changed to be an inclusive environment for all students with intellectual disabilities.

Our Unify Club meets once a month to plan activities and events for our Special Olympics athletes. Our club includes a group of dedicated students who all work for the same goal: to make a difference in our school and the lives of students with special needs.

Currently, every middle and high school in Douglas County School District has Unified soccer, basketball and track teams. We compete against other schools, just like the other sports offered in our schools. The enthusiasm expressed by the crowds at these events exceeds all expectations. Over the last five years, Mesa has participated in the nationwide campaign "Spread the Word, to End the Word" in March. The students at Mesa are encouraged to speak up about the R-word and learn the harmful effects of using this derogatory word. All students are encouraged to speak up, ask questions and learn. It's amazing to see all the students at Mesa talking about the R-word and learning its harmful effects.

Every February, Mesa students and staff join forces with the local police department in the Polar Plunge to raise awareness and money for Special Olympics. The Polar Plunge is an event through which participants run into the freezing cold reservoir. This fundraiser is our way to give back to the organization that supports our school and Unified Champion School programs across our state. Over the past five years, Mesa's Unified Champion Schools program has raised more than \$18,000 for Special Olympics Colorado.

Once a year, the local police department comes to the school for a big game of basketball. The students pack the gym and cheer on our athletes as they play the Castle Rock Police Department. We have been undefeated every year. The support in our community for our program has been amazing.

Both athletes and partners for Mesa have an active role on Colorado's Youth Activation Committee through Special Olympics. The committee is made up of students across our state who work together to promote inclusive communities. Students in our Unified Champion Schools program have represented Colorado at both the state and national levels. We take pride in the students who represent our school and state!

Since the beginning, social inclusion has grown districtwide in Douglas County School District. The program is filled with caring, accepting students who strive to include all students with or without intellectual disabilities.

Taveras Middle School

Taveras, Florida



Taveras Middle School has served as a model Unified Champion School since originally signing on four years ago. Since initial implementation of the program at the school, Taveras has offered a positive example throughout the state as it has cultivated a culture of acceptance and inclusion. Taveras is one of the 115 schools in Florida that currently implement all three core components of the Unified Champion Schools program. Unified Sports, whole school engagement and inclusive youth leadership serve as core principles to the overall success of Taveras Middle School-not only school-wide, but outside the confines of school grounds as well.

The Taveras Middle School Unified Champion Schools program actively promotes social inclusion for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The major event includes a full day disAbility awareness day for the entire sixth grade class. The students watch a wheelchair basketball game, listen to speakers with various disabilities, and learn that all people should be treated fairly and equally. The Unified Champion Schools chapter goes on annual field trips to increase the bonds of friendship for the Unified Sports teams and other participants in the school's Fans in the Stands group.

Another annual event is the Spread the Word to End the Word campaign. Students sign a poster in a pledge to stop saying the R-word, they wear R-word T-shirts, and they make public service announcements about the importance of using respectful language.

Taveras Middle currently offers Unified basketball, Unified soccer and Unified bocce.

East Garner Magnet Middle School

Garner, North Carolina



East Garner Magnet Middle School is in their third year as a Special Olympics Unified Champion School, and they strongly believe it is important that all students have the opportunity to participate in Unified Sports. The school's Unified Champion Schools activities make up a semester-long elective class that takes place during the school day to battle the issue of after-school transportation and, thus, increase participation. Students with and without intellectual disabilities attend the class together after going through an application process for selection.

At the start of the 2017 school year, all students in the class were placed into a Unified pair consisting of one student with an intellectual disability and one student without an intellectual disability. The class focused on healthy living and healthy lifestyles, giving the students an opportunity to not only play Unified, but also learn healthy living habits. The Unified pairs took a fitness test and made goals for living healthier lifestyles. Visiting the Poe Center for Health Education in Raleigh, NC, students participated in an educational program on healthy food choices. This programming was beneficial to all members of the Unified Champion Schools class.

After learning how to maintain a healthy lifestyle, students were ready to Play Unified! The class started with Unified kickball; and students initially played in their Unified pairs, supporting each other throughout the game. As students became more comfortable with the game, they were able to play by themselves with only minimal support from their Unified partner. The kickball season culminated with a tournament at a local university against several other middle

schools. It was a great experience for students with and without intellectual disabilities to be able to visit a university and play kickball on campus.

In 2016, East Garner Magnet Middle School was excited to host a delegation of youth leaders from Special Olympics China who visited the school. The Unified Champion School class was able to put their inclusive youth leadership skills into action while developing ways to show the visitors how they #PlayUnified.

In addition to these highlighted activities, students in the class have also led a Spread the Word to End the Word campaign each year that they have been a Unified Champion School.

Teachers at East Garner Magnet Middle School say the program is rewarding for all students who participate.

“For our students with special needs, they feel a part of the East Garner community. They have friends who talk to them in the hallways and sit with them at school-wide events. The peers without intellectual disabilities gain an understanding and empathy for the students with disabilities. A few of these students have expressed an interest in becoming special education teachers. We, at East Garner Magnet Middle School, are committed to keeping this wonderful program at our school for years to come.”

—Special Education Teacher, East Garner Magnet Middle School

Burnet Middle School

Union, New Jersey



“Becoming a Unified Champion School has changed the lives of my students, school and community.”

—Diana Pielech, Special Education Teacher and Unified Sports Coach, Burnet Middle School

It's easy to feel lost in a big school, especially for a middle school student. Students at Burnet Middle School have the secret to making a big school into a warm and welcoming school—become a Unified Champion School. With more than 1,000 students and 90 educators, Burnet is one of the largest middle schools with the most diverse student body in the entire state of New Jersey. Among these students is a group of about 20 students with different abilities in Mrs. Pielech's Multiple Disabilities class.

To ensure that her students were involved and part of the school community rather than viewed as “those kids” in “that class,” Ms. Pielech decided to change the Special Olympics Club she inherited from simply a volunteer/fundraising club to a Unified Club as part of the Unified Champion Schools program. To garner the support and resources needed to implement the three Unified Champion Schools components, she brought together her principal, Special Services team, Guidance, Physical Education department, and athletic director to serve as the Unified Champion Schools Leadership Team.

In four years the Unified Club has grown from 20 general education students to 150, with more who are interested in joining. The Unified Champion Schools program now includes daily homeroom meetings where groups of 25 general education students rotate into the special education classroom to socialize, plan activities, and develop their skills as inclusive leaders and ambassadors for inclusion in their school. Unified Club members also meet weekly after school for social and Unified Sports activities including basketball, WII sports, bowling, football, volleyball and yoga; and they meet once a month in their Unified PE class.

The club's Leadership Team organizes the social and Unified Sports activities, and attends two annual youth summits sponsored by Special Olympics New Jersey. Other students are engaged in helping and participating. Throughout the year, the students have fun, but also volunteer and fundraise for important causes. “Participating in the Unified Champion Schools programs like the Rutgers Unified Game Day and youth summits provided our students with opportunities to see that there is more to life. It allows them to be a part of something bigger,” Pielech says. “These are life-changing experiences for both students with and without disabilities. Watching our students prepare for the Youth Summit and then share our story with other schools was extremely rewarding. It gave my students confidence to be proud of all they had accomplished.”