



Unified Sports Guide for Schools and Youth

**Special
Olympics**





What is Special Olympics Unified Sports®?

Special Olympics Unified Sports® is an inclusive sports program. It combines students with and without intellectual disabilities (ID) for sports and fitness activities. Students of different abilities train and compete together as a team.

What is a Unified School?

A Unified School is a school that conducts Unified Sports activities at least two times in a calendar year.

Why is Unified Schools important?

Unified Schools empowers youth with and without ID to change the world through sports. It uses sport to promote social inclusion. Students with and without ID both benefit from having Unified Sports in their school. They make friends and develop social and emotional skills. It creates inclusive learning experiences for all.

How to use this guide:

This guide is for youth leaders, teachers, and principals interested in starting Unified Sports in a school. It will explain the process in 10 steps. After reading this, you will know what Unified Sports is, activity options, and how to implement. At the end is a Resources page with links for more detailed information.



1. CONNECT WITH YOUR NATIONAL SPECIAL OLYMPICS PROGRAM

- Start by connecting with your national Special Olympics Program
- If you need help, use this link to the [Special Olympics Program Locator](#). Your National Program can help connect you with a local program in your area

2. FORM YOUR SCHOOL'S LEADERSHIP TEAM

- Bring together stakeholders such as school administrators, teachers, and students with and without ID to form the leadership team
- If your school does not have students with ID, you can partner with a special education school or organization that works with youth with ID
- The leadership team will plan and lead Unified Sports activities in your school

3. LEARN ABOUT SPECIAL OLYMPICS UNIFIED SPORTS

- Understand the Principle of Meaningful Involvement and the models of Unified Sports
- This is key to how Unified Sports promotes social inclusion in schools

4. DECIDE WHAT KIND OF UNIFIED SPORTS ACTIVITIES YOUR SCHOOL WILL DO

- Choose from different Unified Sports activities commonly run in schools
- These can be Unified Sports Experience days, Unified intramural leagues, Unified physical education, Unified fitness clubs, or Unified interscholastic competitions

5. DEVELOP YOUR PLAN

- Decide where, when, and how Unified Sports activities will take place
- Determine what you need to for the activities
- Agree on who will conduct the activities and the roles they will play

6. RECRUIT A COACH

- Find an adult who will coach
- A coach can be a physical education teacher or other adult who will complete coach's training
- It is important that the coach have understanding of the sport activity you choose

7. RECRUIT UNIFIED TEAMMATES

- Find youth with and without ID who will be your Unified athletes and Unified partners
- Hold an information meeting with teammates and parents to teach them about Unified Sports

8. EXECUTE

- Start your Unified Sports activities!

9. REPLICATE AND SHARE

- Take pictures to share on social media and through your school's publications
- Share what you are doing with other schools

10. GROW AND SUSTAIN

- Learn from your first experience with Unified Sports. Continue what worked well and think about what you can improve.



Step 1:

CONNECT WITH YOUR NATIONAL SPECIAL OLYMPICS PROGRAM

The first step to bringing Unified Sports to your school is to connect with your national Special Olympics Program.

Use the [Special Olympics Program Locator](#) to contact your Special Olympics Program. If there is a Special Olympics sub-Program in your area, your national Program can help connect you.

Special Olympics staff can help you find resources such as sport-specific coaching guides or training workshops. Staff may also be able to connect you with other Unified Schools so you can visit to see firsthand how it works.

You can also discuss fundraising ideas with your Special Olympics Program. They can help you make your Unified Schools activities sustainable.



Step 2:

FORM YOUR SCHOOL'S LEADERSHIP TEAM

The next step is to form a team to lead the work. The leadership team will be responsible for creating the goals for the school and guiding implementation.

If your school is doing Unified Schools as a partnership between a mainstream school and a special school, we recommend that **each school** have a leadership team. The schools' leadership teams should **collaborate** on planning.

It is important that the school leadership team include both youth and adults who share responsibility. Youth and adults form a team with different skills, networks, points of view, and opportunities to lead.

We recommend that your school's leadership team include:

- Students with ID
- Students without ID
- Teachers (both special education and general education)
- Parents of students with ID
- Parents of students without ID
- At least one administrator or staff with the ability to commit time and resources to the work



Step 3:

LEARN ABOUT UNIFIED SPORTS

It is important for the members of your school’s leadership team to understand how Unified Sports promotes social inclusion.

The Foundation of Unified Sports - The Principle of Meaningful Involvement

The **principle of meaningful involvement** ensures that every player in Unified Sports has an opportunity to contribute to the success of the team. This is one way that Unified Sports is important. It gives everyone the chance to develop and demonstrate their abilities.

Models of Unified Sports

There are **3 basic models** of Unified Sports. Schools can choose which model(s) will be the best fit for them and their students.

Competitive Unified Sports	Player Development Unified Sports	Recreational Unified Sports
Sports opportunities for students with and without ID of similar age and similar athletic abilities to train and compete on the same team.	Sports opportunities for students with and without ID of similar age but different athletic ability levels. Teammates of higher abilities serve as mentors. They assist teammates of lower abilities to develop sports skills and successfully participate on the team.	Non-competitive inclusive sports opportunities for students with and without ID.

Each model uses the principle of meaningful involvement to promote inclusion. In the next step, we will learn about how these models look in schools.



Step 4:

DECIDE WHAT UNIFIED SPORTS ACTIVITIES TO DO

Now it is time to decide what activities you will do. Here is a list of activities your school can choose from:

1. Unified Sports Experience

Overview: A 1-day event where Special Olympics athletes and partners come together for informal Unified Sports. If schools hold these types of events, they must commit to have at least **2 per year** to be considered a Unified School. This is a good option for schools starting Unified Sports for the first time. However, we encourage schools to work towards activities that are more ongoing.

Example: A mainstream school and a special education school come together once a semester for a day of Unified Sports games such as bocce. During the first semester, students from the special education school went to the general education school. During the second semester, they did the opposite.

Time required: 1-3 weeks of planning, 1 day event

Coach: No certified coach required. However, there should be a physical education teacher or adult who can manage and officiate the sports activities

Age: Primary, Secondary

Recommended sports: Athletics, football, basketball, badminton, volleyball

Unified Sports models: Recreation

Resources: [Unified Sports Experience quick-start guide](#)

2. Unified Sports Fitness Clubs

Overview: Unified Sports Fitness Clubs bring students with and without ID together for regular fitness activity. Participants monitor their progress regularly and have fitness goals.

Example: A mainstream school and a special school come together two times a week to walk near one of the schools or around the school track. All students use pedometers and track their steps in a notebook.

Time required: At least 1 time per week on an ongoing basis

Coach: Requires an adult who can help organize activities and serve as a fitness mentor. Coaches are encouraged complete Special Olympics Unified Sports coaches training.

Age: Primary, Secondary

Recommended sports: Walking, hiking, or other fitness activities

Unified Sports models: Recreation

Resources: [Unified Sports Fitness Clubs Overview](#)

3. Unified Physical Education (PE) Classes

Overview: A physical education (PE) class where students with and without ID practice sports and do fitness activities during the school day. Unified PE can be adapted to meet your local or national PE standards.

Example: An integrated primary school started a Unified PE class. Students with and without ID attend the class for 2 class periods every week to practice sports skills together. The PE teacher serves as the coach.

Time required: Class period during the school day, preferably for at least 1 semester

Coach: A PE teacher who will teach students sport and fitness skills. Unified PE teachers are encouraged to complete Special Olympics Unified Sports coaches training.

Age: Primary, Secondary

Recommended sports: The SOFit Unified Fitness model has lesson plans that can be used for Unified PE Classes. The SONA Unified PE Resources also have lesson plans that cover various sports and fitness skills.

Unified Sports models: Recreation

Resources: [SOFit Resources](#) and [Unified PE Resources](#)

4. Intramural leagues

Overview: In an intramural league, students in the same school (or pair of schools) form Unified Sports teams and compete against each other.

Example: An integrated school started a Unified Sports intramural football league. The school divided students into 4 Unified teams. These teams compete against each other every week for 8 weeks.

Time required: At least 3 months of planning, 8-12 weeks of competition

Coach: A coach can be a PE Teacher, sports coach, or other adult trained and certified in the specific sport.

Age: Primary, Secondary

Recommended sports: Football, basketball, athletics, bocce, badminton, floorball

Unified Sports models: Competitive, Player Development, Recreation

Resources: [Unified Sports Competition Guidelines](#) and sport-specific coaching Guides

5. Interscholastic competitions

Overview: If there are more schools in your area with Unified Sports, you can work with them and your Special Olympics Programs to set up competitions between schools' Unified Sports teams. If your city, state, or province has an interscholastic sports association, they could also be a good partner to help organize these activities.

Example: Several schools in a city all have Unified Sports teams and organize a basketball league. Teams train and compete for an 8-week season. The league ends with a final championship tournament.

Time required: At least 3 months of planning, 8-12 weeks of competition

Coach: A coach can be a PE Teacher or other adult with training and certification in the specific sport.

Age: Secondary

Recommended sports: Football, basketball, athletics, bocce, badminton, floorball

Unified Sports model: Competitive, Player Development

Resources: Unified Sports Rules and Coaching Guides (see Resources section)



Step 5:

MAKE YOUR PLAN

Now that your leadership team has decided which Unified Sports activities you will do in your school, you need a plan to execute. Use the worksheet on this page to make your plan:

Goal	Major Task	When will each task be completed?	Who will facilitate the completion of this goal?	Who else can help?
What we will do:	1.	1.	What we will do:	What we will do:
	2.	2.		
	3.	3.		
	4.	4.		
	5.	5.		
What we will do:	1.	1.	What we will do:	What we will do:
	2.	2.		
	3.	3.		
	4.	4.		
	5.	5.		
What we will do:	1.	1.	What we will do:	What we will do:
	2.	2.		
	3.	3.		
	4.	4.		
	5.	5.		



Step 6:

RECRUIT A COACH

It is important to have a coach who can help teammates develop their sports skills and maintain safety. A coach should have knowledge and training of the rules of the sport you choose. A coach also helps to facilitate the interaction between athletes and partners on a Unified Sports team. Coaches should promote inclusion and meaningful involvement of all teammates.

In schools, Special Olympics Unified Sports coaches are often:

- Sports coaches
- Physical Education Teachers
- Special Education Teachers
- Parents/Family members
- Other adult volunteers

Check with your Special Olympics National Program for their certification requirements for coaches. The National Program can also share information about coaching certification training that may be available.

The online [Unified Sports Coaching Course](#) is a good resource to learn more about coaching Unified Sports.



Step 7:

RECRUIT UNIFIED TEAMMATES

Now you're ready to recruit your teammates. Unified Sports teams are made up of Special Olympics athletes with ID and Unified partners without ID.

Who is a Unified partner?

A Unified partner is a student without an ID who actively participates as a teammate with Special Olympics athletes in Unified Sports.

Who is a Special Olympics athlete?

A Special Olympics athlete can be a student or community member who has ID. If there are no students with ID in your school, you can partner with special education schools or community organizations that work with youth with ID. Your local Special Olympics Program can help make these connections.

Commitment and Education of Teammates

- Consider holding a Unified partner orientation before the first practice. It is very helpful for Unified partners who may never have met someone with ID. Partners should know the basics about ID, Special Olympics, and the Unified mentality.
- Remember: Unified partners are there to be teammates and friends. They are not there to "serve" Special Olympics athletes. This is critical for partners to understand in order for true friendships to develop between teammates. Both Unified partners and Special Olympics athletes serve their schools and communities by making them more inclusive.
- Hold an orientation for all teammates. Use this time to introduce Special Olympics and the Unified Sports activities you will do.
- If Unified Sports activities will be after school hours, confirm all participants have permission. Make sure parents and guardians understand the expectations of participating.
- Ensure all teammates and parents know the schedule and logistics. Use social media tools like Facebook, Whatsapp, WeChat or a shared calendar to communicate practice dates and times.



Step 8:

Execute

Your First Practice

Include “ice-breakers” in your first practice so all teammates get to know each other. If your school is doing “team” sports like football, all teammates should take “Skills Assessment Tests”. The coach will use these test to make a team with the right match of skill levels. Links to sport-specific resources with these tests are in the resources section of this guide.

Practice good fitness habits

Better health leads to better sports performance. Start your sports activities with a warm-up and end with stretching and cool down. Have plenty of water to drink. If you provide food, have nutritious snacks. You can find suggestions in the Special Olympics Fit 5 guide as well as fitness cards and videos.

Remember, things do not happen overnight

Great things take time. You may only have a few students involved at first and that’s okay. With dedication your program will grow!



Step 9:

Share

- **Spread the word:** Take lots of pictures and share what you are doing! Post pictures and stories online. Write about Unified Sports in your local newspaper. Invite media to cover your events.
- We encourage you to share information about Unified Sports with other schools in your area. Presenting for another school is a great opportunity for youth leaders to practice public speaking skills.

Step 10:

Grow and Sustain

- Learn from your first experience with Unified Sports at your school. How did you succeed? Do those things again. What can you improve? Change those things next time.
- If you have started with Unified Sports Experiences, try to work towards starting ongoing Unified Sports activities.
- Find supporters to help grow your work. Approach local education authorities, youth groups, or businesses and ask them to support you with financial or in-kind resources. This is also an opportunity for youth leaders to practice pitching and sharing their story



Resources:

Unified Sports (General):

- [Unified Sports Online Coaching Course](#)
- [Assessing Players and Forming Unified Teams](#)
- [Guidelines for Successful Unified Sports Competition](#)
- [Quick Reference Coaching Guide](#)
- [Unified Sports Videos](#)

Specific Sports:

- [Athletics Resources](#)
- [Badminton Resources](#)
- [Basketball Resources](#)
- [Bocce Resources](#)
- [Floorball Resources](#)
- [Football \(Soccer\) Resources](#)

Unified Fitness Resources

- [Fit 5 Guide](#)
- [Fitness Cards](#)
- [Fitness Videos](#)

Additional [Youth and Unified Schools Resources](#)

Goal	Major Task	When will each task be completed?	Who will facilitate the completion of this goal?	Who else can help?
What we will do:	1.	1.	What we will do:	What we will do:
	2.	2.		
	3.	3.		
	4.	4.		
	5.	5.		
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	4.	4.		
	5.	5.		