



Urban District Strategy: Building Relevance in Urban Districts

This document is one of five in a collection of resources specific to Unified Champion Schools programming in urban school districts. The complete set of Urban District Strategy resources is located at <https://resources.specialolympics.org/community-building/youth-and-school/unified-champion-schools> and was published August 2019.



Special Olympics
**Unified Champion
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What is meant by “building relevance?”

Building relevance is conveying purpose and value to a group or community. It allows those you are trying to influence to know that the work is important, and it matters. It satisfies those participating in the program, as they know that they have an advocate who understands their needs and is committed to meeting those needs.

In urban communities, Unified Champion Schools matters not only to students with intellectual disabilities, but to all students, educators, administrators, and everyone in the community dedicated to creating a comprehensive educational and inclusive learning environment.

Why is Unified Champion Schools relevant?

The Unified Champion Schools program is relevant because the lives of students are enhanced as the participants grow and learn in an inclusive environment. Sustained interaction in socially inclusive schools improves the quality of instruction when students learn from one another. Unified Champion Schools, with its core components of Unified Sports, inclusive youth leadership, and whole school engagement, promotes personal development at every level, and is a proven program for delivering excellence in student engagement.

With whom do we build relevance?

The simple answer is, everyone; there can never be too much goodwill. But the goal is to build relevance with a purpose. Once the goals and objectives of the program are firmly in place, identify the individuals and organizations that can be of greatest assistance and support in strengthening Unified Champion Schools and increasing participation. Early in the process, begin building relationships with:

- The education community including policymakers, administrators and educators.
- The athletic community including athletic organizations, interscholastic federations, and athletic directors.
- The civic and business community including government; law enforcement; business, entertainment and community leaders; community service providers; and faith-based leaders.
- Disability organizations and service providers.

These individuals and organizations will be the foundation of the community village that will sustain and grow your urban Unified Champion Schools program.



Expand Networks and Leverage Relationships

The most effective way to build relevance is to expand operating networks, and leverage existing relationships. The more people and organizations are familiar with the work of Unified Champion Schools, the easier it is to build and sustain support. The Unified Champion Schools program provides a unique opportunity to expose an expanding audience to the Special Olympics family. Often, when people think of Special Olympics, they only associate the organization with the athletic Games. The Unified Champion Schools program provides a unique opportunity to invite a broader segment of the community to become engaged in the program and support students with intellectual disabilities. Expanded networks might include:

- Teacher unions
- Administrator organizations
- Fraternal and civic organizations
- Media
- Business groups and organizations (e.g., Chamber of Commerce)

To further expand your network:

- Utilize your network, and leverage current relationships to gain access to others including area staff, school staff, and volunteers.
- Identify the individuals and groups responsible for authorizing or approving programs, and build a relationship with them.
- Ask for introductions to leaders, decision makers, associations, and organizations that can help build relevance and garner support for your program.

Develop Leaders as Unified Champion Schools Advocates

Identify who within the district or in a similarly constructed district can speak to the advantages of Unified Champion Schools.

- Assistant Superintendents are school leaders and, in many districts, have supervisory responsibilities over most programs. Building rapport with them can be a major asset. They are familiar with the schools that have the greatest potential for early success. They know the resource pool better than almost anyone in the district, and will be the ones who ultimately approve the involvement of special education and physical education personnel.
 - Parents and Unified pairs are among the most effective advocates for Unified Champion Schools because they are examples of the program's success. They provide leadership among their peers, and they are particularly effective at presenting before school boards and policymaking bodies.
 - Identify who on the school board, city council or other governing body is supportive of Special Olympics and/or social inclusion programs. Make sure they are familiar with the program where it already exists in the district or the state, and what the potential is in other parts of the district. Invite school board members and elected officials to attend events and to be presenters at awards ceremonies.
 - Frequently, individuals are unaware of how much they can contribute to the growth of your program until they are asked and deployed. Mobilize other stakeholders and service providers for students with intellectual disabilities in leadership roles, and as advocates for the program.
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Developing Partnerships

SONA can be a resource for helping program staff understand school structure and programs, and can help increase your knowledge and initial navigation of the district. Take the time to understand how Unified Champion Schools fits into the district's overall education plan before attempting to establish a partnership.

When approaching the district or school to initiate a partnership, start by getting to know the demographics of the district and/or school. Be sure that what you can offer programmatically aligns with the needs and capabilities of the school and the district.

Review the Unified Champion Schools Community Asset Mapping in the additional Urban Districts Strategy resources to outline strategies for evaluating and ranking the community's capital and resources, and identify potential partners. Once potential partners are identified, develop mutually beneficial community partnerships with groups such as:

- Community-based organizations (e.g., Boys & Girls Clubs, YMCA)
- Parent groups for students with special needs
- Parent organizations such as PTAs, and PTOs which are more common in urban districts
- State and local school board members and elected officials
- State superintendent or administrator organizations (some have urban working groups)
- School district committees
- Interscholastic associations
- Student council associations

Evaluation and Measurement

Measuring progress toward the goal of increasing Unified Champion Schools presence in urban districts to 10 percent of programs is imperative. SONA will develop a tool for measuring effectiveness of the Urban District Strategy resources, with an objective toward necessary modifications where needed to reflect lessons learned, and mid-course corrections.

Technical Assistance

SONA considers building relevance essential to establishing effective urban programs and will provide technical assistance to program staff in the development and implementation of instruments, strategies, and other resource materials for building relevance within urban districts.



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