



Urban District Strategy: Family Engagement 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.



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Research on family engagement in urban districts frequently presents a picture of limited participation by families in the educational experience and activities of their children. The research, however, often fails to explore the underlying reasons why. In urban communities where best practices and workable solutions for family engagement are explicitly designed around the needs of the community and the family, participation is shown to increase significantly. The Unified Champion Schools Urban District Initiative requires a comprehensive approach to family engagement at each participating school and district to ensure families of children with intellectual disabilities get the support needed to increase their involvement and ensure their children can participate in Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools.

What is family engagement?

The American Psychological Association defines parental [family] engagement as “parents and school staff working together to support and improve the learning, development and health of children and adolescents.” Research has shown that student performance, and social and emotional development is greatly enhanced by family engagement. This is true for both general education students and students with intellectual disabilities.

How to Create and Sustain an Effective Unified Champion Schools Family Engagement Strategy

The Unified Champion Schools whole community engagement approach is consistent with studies on meaningful family engagement, which reflect a systematic approach that is more than the traditional roles of parents attending events and supporting school activities. Meaningful family engagement is intentional, and is constructed around the specific needs of the students and the community. Although families of children with intellectual disabilities are encouraged to engage with the whole school community, it is important that they have opportunities to work with families and organizations that understand their needs and can assist in providing the specific services necessary to increase their students’ participation. The first consideration in recruiting families to the program is to be sure you are not adding to an already stressful school and work experience.





Create Family Engagement Partnerships

- Existing family groups
- Community-based organizations
- Faith-based centers
- District-wide resources
- School-based resources and liaisons

Sustained family engagement strategies for Unified Champion Schools urban districts should include:

- A district inventory to identify those among the student population with intellectual disabilities, and demographics of the community at large.
- An established effective engagement plan for families of children with intellectual disabilities, drawn from the district inventory and community asset mapping data.
- Family/school partnerships including shared leadership roles for families of children with intellectual disabilities.
- Multiple strategies and tools for communicating with all families (social media, phone calls, home visits).
- Diverse opportunities for families to engage with the school.
- Family activities and services.
- Inclusive parent and/or family groups.
 - » Elementary, middle and high school parent committees
 - » Family engagement liaisons
- Effective use of and partnership with community assets and stakeholders.
 - » Government agencies such as the Department of Disability Services
 - » Parks and recreation departments
 - » Faith-based institutions

Addressing Challenges to Effective Family Engagement

Modern American families face multiple challenges impacting their time and ability to commit to school engagement. Urban families have even greater challenges with circumstances such as:

- Scheduling conflicts, including intractable work schedules
- Greater percentages of single-family households
- Childcare needs
- Transportation
- Language barriers

Challenges become more extreme when imposed on families of children with disabilities. Anticipation and recognition of these hindrances allow program staff to set solutions in place so that they can be prepared to present them to families early in the recruitment process.

Establishing a Family Engagement Advisory Committee

Several urban districts have found success in the creation of a Family Engagement Advisory Committee to assist Special Olympics in understanding community needs, spreading the word about Unified Champion Schools, and working with families to facilitate their Unified Champion Schools participation.

The role of the committee is to help Unified Champion Schools provide important information, networking opportunities, and assistance to families of children with intellectual disabilities. This assistance includes but is not limited to:

- Family support
- Inclusive family activities
- Resource accessibility
- Gap analysis and solutions

This committee assists in creating a plan that best fits their district with the purpose of increasing student participation in Unified Champion Schools.



Evaluation and Measurement

Measuring progress toward an established Unified Champion Schools 10 percent urban district school participation goal will be critical to ensuring the goal is met. Programs will be expected to measure program effectiveness, impact and progress, and include how the level of family engagement at multiple intervals of the program year is being maintained.

Technical Assistance

SONA considers family engagement critical to building an effective urban program and will provide technical assistance to program staff in the development of community engagement tools and support for Family Engagement Advisory Committees. The evaluation instrument and technical assistance services will be aligned with evaluation and technical assistance components associated with other parts of the Urban District Strategy resources.



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