



# Urban District Strategy:

## Building & Expanding Unified Champion Schools in Urban Districts

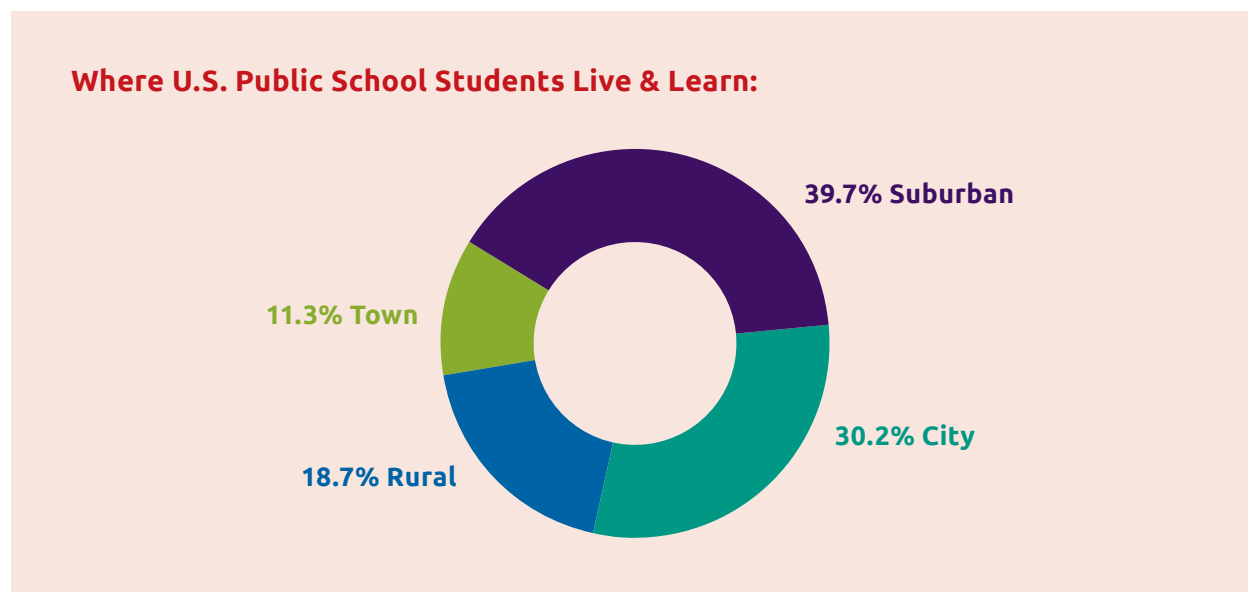
*This document is one of five in a collection of resources specific to Unified Champion Schools programming in urban school districts. The complete set of Urban District Strategy resources is located at <https://resources.specialolympics.org/community-building/youth-and-school/unified-champion-schools>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



Special Olympics  
**Unified Champion  
Schools®**



Special Olympics North America (SONA) adopted a goal to increase the number of Unified Champion Schools nationwide to 10,000 by the year 2023. This goal includes a proportionate increase in the number of participating schools in urban districts from its current standing of 7 percent to 10 percent, a task not without its challenges. An urban school is classified by the National Center for Education Statistics as a city school serving students in metropolitan areas. There are more than 13,000 public school districts in the United States, and these schools serve 50.7 million students. While the largest percentage of students represents suburban schools, city schools have a significant share of the student population.



Encouraging urban districts and schools to join the Special Olympics family requires compelling data to demonstrate to teachers and administrators that the Unified Champion Schools program is not simply one more thing added to an already complex assortment of services they must provide to students. They must be convinced that it is an opportunity to elevate the educational experience and learning environment of their schools to a top-tier level that will benefit all students.

Students in urban school districts face complications that exist in greater proportions in densely populated areas than their counterparts in other communities: high rates of poverty, large percentages of limited English proficiency, single parent households, family instability, and challenging health concerns. They are subjected to teachers with less experience in the classroom, deteriorating infrastructure, and limited or minimal resources. When those challenges are coupled with intellectual disabilities and special education needs, the entire system can be overwhelmed. For this reason, the intent to introduce Unified Champion Schools into the system requires careful planning and specific supports to maximize the likely success of the program.

The Unified Champion Schools Urban District Initiative will have a whole community engagement approach at its core. A whole community approach attempts to engage the full capacity of the private and nonprofit sectors, including businesses, faith-based and disability organizations, and the general public in conjunction with local, tribal, state, territorial and governmental partners.



### Whole Community Engagement

- Shared understanding of community and school district needs and capabilities
- Greater empowerment and integration of resources from across the community
- Stronger social infrastructure
- Establishment of relationships that facilitate more effective implementation, quality programming, and sustainability
- Increased district and community knowledge and awareness

The whole community concept is a means by which residents, school district leaders and staff, organizational and community leaders, government officials, and State Special Olympics Program staff can collectively understand and assess the needs of their schools and communities in the context of Unified Champion Schools quality implementation and sustainability. This approach builds a more effective path to Unified Champion Schools urban development and growth.

With the whole community engagement approach, Unified Champion Schools will focus on four areas to support urban districts.

### **Community Mapping**

Community mapping is a process used to evaluate and rank a community's assets and resources to determine how they can be applied to support growth, development, and improvement in the quality of life within a community. For the purposes of Unified Champion Schools, a thorough appraisal of potential partners and resources in a given community in advance will aid in program implementation and sustainability.

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### **State/District Structures**

While the United States is unique in its model of more than 50 different education systems, there is a commonality among the states in the way the systems are set up. Education is a state function, administered by local districts. Understanding the way schools and districts work and how they are governed is a critical component of engaging the school community in a meaningful and respectful way. SONA will provide a descriptive guide of the state and district education system for program staff and participating partners that outlines the state/district structure, and details key components and players in the system.

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### **Family Engagement**

All parents and families want what is best for their children, though some may not have the skills and strategies to advocate in a way that best supports their children's needs so that desired outcomes can be achieved. Too often, the system's programmatic plans for parental involvement and engagement are not designed to accommodate the circumstances faced by urban families. Families are expected to adapt to the system without the system adapting to the unique needs of these families. Special Olympics will apply best practices and community-based strategies to engage and activate families in Unified Champion Schools experiences, yielding the best possible outcomes for their children.

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### **Building Relevance**

The construct of purposeful relationships within and beyond the boundaries of schools is essential to successful outcomes of the urban strategy. Building and demonstrating relevance of Unified Champion Schools requires building belief in the mission and vision of the program throughout the community, maintaining visibility, and publicizing the benefits and achievements of Unified Champion Schools. With technical assistance and professional development, SONA will support program staff in the development and mobilization of relevant and effective partnerships.

These four components implemented through the whole community engagement format will be monitored and evaluated for impact and effectiveness to ensure the Urban District Initiative remains on track to reach the established 10 percent participation goal by 2023.



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