



Urban District Strategy: State/District Structures

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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Education in the United States is a state function, administered by local districts. The federal role in education focuses on issues of accountability and equity, supporting underserved populations including students with special needs, English language learners, and students in high poverty areas. Urban school districts tend to have a large percentage of schools eligible for federal funding due to the demographics of the student population and the concentration of poverty in densely populated areas. Understanding the structure and role of state and local education systems is a prerequisite to understanding how Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools fits into an urban setting, and to building a strong working relationship with those districts.



The Structure

STATE EDUCATION AGENCIES (SEAS) are the governing agencies charged with providing information, technical assistance, and resources to local education agencies. They administer federal grant programs, set educational standards, and develop statewide accountability systems. State education agencies also administer statewide assessments in math and English Language Arts as required by federal law and other subjects as determined by the State Board of Education. The agency is led by a chief state school officer whose title varies by state; most are governed by an elected or appointed State Board of Education. **Approach the state education agency when you want to have Unified Champion Schools considered as a statewide program.**

LOCAL EDUCATION AGENCIES (LEAS) are local education entities that have day-to-day operational authority over local school districts generally comprised of elementary, middle and secondary schools within a defined geographic area. The local school district is run by a superintendent and is governed by a School Board comprised of members typically elected to serve in this role. The Board adopts and allocates the district budget in accordance with federal and state law. **Approach the local district when you want to establish Unified Champion Schools programming in the district or in a specific school.**

Both the state and local systems usually have deputy superintendents with general supervisory responsibilities, and it is appropriate to get to know these individuals and keep them on a standard mailing or social media list. Both state and local systems also generally have an assistant superintendent or department head that oversees special education, and someone responsible for health and physical education.



Governance of Education for Special Needs

The statutes governing services to students with special needs are derived from the federal government through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act.

IDEA – Individuals with Disabilities Act

- Originally entitled Education for All Handicapped Children (94-142)
- Provides for a free appropriate public education to each child with a disability
- Requires an Individualized Education Program (IEP)
- Encourages inclusion or mainstreaming

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act

- Contains a broader definition of “children with disabilities”
- Includes more general regulations protecting people with disabilities

The other major federal law impacting not only those with special needs, but all students, is the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. It is currently known as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and replaced No Child Left Behind in 2015. Both iterations of the law represent a structure requiring state standards, assessment and accountability systems. Most significant for Unified Champion Schools is ESSA’s position on school climate and safety, and the requirements that states assist local districts in addressing bullying, harassment and discipline.

In other words, the Unified Champion Schools program meets the programmatic definition of certain education programs, strategies and initiatives in federal law, and can be supported with federal funds and/or used to meet federal requirements of services to students.

Unified Champion Schools Resources for Engaging Urban Schools

When approaching an urban district, you should know what you are trying to promote, which education programs align with Unified Champion Schools goals, and which resources Unified Champion Schools can offer to the district or school. The other resources in this Urban District Strategy collection outline how to identify community needs, strengthen family engagement, and build relevant partnerships, all of which are strategies for overcoming challenges to establishing Unified Champion Schools programs. Once you have established initial contact and begin working in the district or school, use all the Urban District Strategy resources to reinforce your efforts.

The Unified Champion Schools program offers an abundance of resources in addition to the Urban District Strategy resources to assist program staff in understanding and supporting districts and schools. When approaching urban districts, be prepared to address how the Unified Champion Schools program can support their efforts to serve students with intellectual disabilities using core program components of Unified Sports, inclusive youth leadership, and whole school engagement. Other Unified Champion Schools resources address the following:

- **Sports and Extracurricular Activities**

Unified Champion Schools playbooks have been created for elementary, middle, and high school levels, and include guidelines for implementing and enhancing Unified Sports. They contain checklists for planning and getting started, and tips for sustaining programs. Playbooks are available for download at <https://resources.specialolympics.org/community-building/youth-and-school/ucs-playbook-resources>

- **Health and Physical Education**

Nearly every state requires health and physical education, though not all require assessments for these subjects. The Unified Champion Schools Unified Physical Education and Fitness programs can assist programs advocating for state support of these subjects, while also supporting school districts in delivery of health and physical education through Unified Sports. Both the Unified Physical Education Resource (Second Edition) and the Special Olympics Fitness Guide for Schools are located at <https://resources.specialolympics.org/community-building/youth-and-school/unified-champion-schools>

- **Support for Special Education Students and Parents**

All students in special education including students with developmental disabilities are required to have an Individualized Education Program (IEP). The Unified Champion Schools program includes opportunities that could meet the requirements of some components of a student IEP.

- **Socially Inclusive School Districts**

Unified Champion Schools resources promoting socially inclusive school districts provide support for programs that benefit social, emotional and academic learning, and anti-bullying initiatives. Multi-tiered systems of support are available for all program components.

- **Education Programs**

SONA provides technical assistance on the various requirements of the state and local education systems and programs including which positions are most appropriate to approach regarding Unified Champion Schools. There is also an education glossary of terms available to aid in understanding the laws, titles and acronyms used in the education community.

- **Student Performance**

Annual Unified Champion Schools evaluation has yielded data and anecdotal information supporting the premise that student performance can be improved in an inclusive environment. To find all Core Messaging from Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools, please visit the “Core Messaging” page on <https://resources.specialolympics.org/community-building/youth-and-school/unified-champion-schools>. Additionally, find all past and current annual reports from the Center for Social Development and Education (CSDE) at the University of Massachusetts Boston here: https://www.umb.edu/csde/research/project_unify

- **Professional Development**

Unified Champion Schools resources can aid in training coaches, volunteers and other support personnel interested in participating in Special Olympics or working with students on youth leadership development.

For all additional Unified Champion Schools resources, please visit <https://resources.specialolympics.org/community-building/youth-and-school/unified-champion-schools>



The contents of this “Special Olympics Unified Physical Education Resources” were developed under generous funding from the US Department of Education, #H380W150001 and #H380W160001. However, those contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the US Department of Education, and one should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.