

# Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools Research

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## WHY UNIFIED CHAMPION SCHOOLS?

The typical school and social environment for young people today can be fraught with challenges. Intense social and academic pressures are worsened by widespread bullying. In the United States, nearly 1 in 3 students ages 12 - 18 report being bullied during the school year and 71% of young people say they have seen bullying in their schools.<sup>1,2</sup> Students with disabilities, including those with intellectual disabilities, are two to three times more likely to be bullied than their peers without disabilities.<sup>3</sup> While bullying remains a prominent issue, students with intellectual disabilities (ID) also face challenges with isolation in schools. Students with ID are less likely than students with any other type of disability to spend time in a regular education environment.<sup>4</sup> This is troubling given the strong relationship between school connectedness and several important outcomes including regular school attendance and staying in school.<sup>5</sup> This research demonstrates a clear need to promote a school environment that addresses not only the academic needs of students with ID, but also their social needs for friendship and community.

## IMPACT ON STUDENTS

Special Olympics Unified Schools strategy includes Unified Sports, inclusive clubs, whole school engagement, and youth leadership in combination to address many of the challenges faced by students with intellectual disabilities in schools today. Schools that implement this strategy in its entirety, referred to as Unified Champion Schools, create communities where students with intellectual disabilities feel welcome and are routinely included in all school activities, opportunities and functions. As of 2017, over 5,000 schools in the U.S. participate as Unified Champion Schools, and as many as 3.6 million youth are taking part in inclusive activities.<sup>6</sup>

1 Robert, S., Kemp, J., Truman, & Snyder (2012). Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2011. Available at <http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/content/pub/pdf/iscs11.pdf>

2 Bradshaw, C.P., Sawyer, A.L., & O'Brennan, L.M. (2007). Bullying and peer victimization at school: Perceptual differences between students and school staff. *School Psychology Review*, 36(3), 361-382.

3 C. Marshall, E. Kendall, M. Banks & R. Gover (Eds.), (2009). *Disabilities: Insights from across fields and around the world* (Vol. 1-3). Westport, CT: Praeger Perspectives.

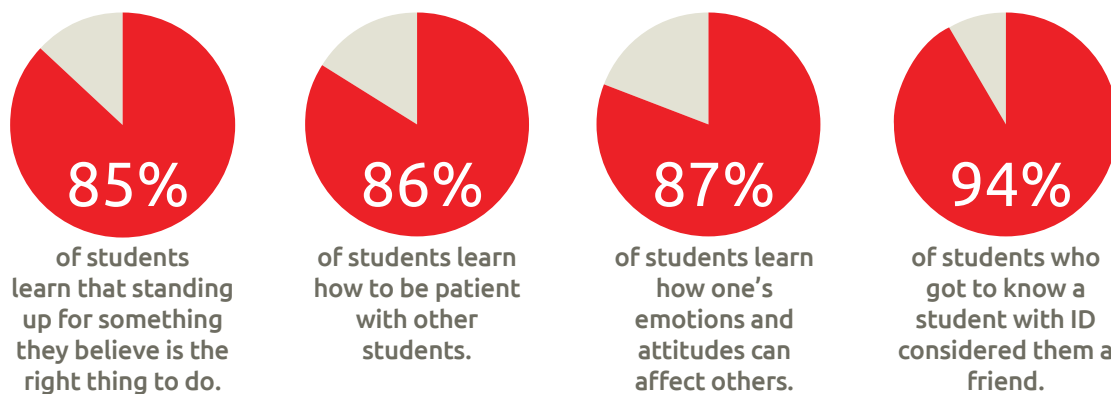
4 U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) database, retrieved May 22, 2013, from <http://tadnet.public.tadnet.org/pages/712>

5 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *School Connectedness: Strategies for Increasing Protective Factors Among Youth*. Atlanta, GA: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; 2009.

An evaluation of Unified Champion Schools found that these schools provide students with and without intellectual disabilities opportunities to learn and play together and to form friendships.<sup>7</sup>

- 92% of school liaisons (the person in each school responsible for implementing the Unified Champions Schools program) say that Unified Schools programming gives students with and without intellectual disabilities more opportunities to work together.
- 89% of liaisons observed that Unified Champion Schools increase participation of students with ID in school activities.
- 97% of students reported that Unified Champion Schools had impacted their school as a whole through bringing people together, creating inclusion, raising awareness, and increasing respect.

### UNIFIED CHAMPION SCHOOLS ALSO PROVIDE STUDENTS WITH THE OPPORTUNITY TO DEVELOP SOCIAL SKILLS<sup>7,8</sup>



These results demonstrate the profound impact that the Unified Strategy can have in schools. Importantly, it has been found that all elements of the strategy (Unified Sports, inclusive clubs, and whole school engagement) are essential to create this level of impact.

**“He has improved his social skills...His world-view of ‘this is what I can do and this is how I have to do it’ has been expanded beyond the limitations of the educational program that he’s in. He looks for ways that he can meet society at his level and his way, rather than hiding from his peers that are not special needs. There’s nothing good enough I can say about this program. It’s a necessity.”**

—Parent

6 2017 Quarterly Reach Report (2017). Washington, DC: Special Olympics, Inc.

7 Center for Social Development and Education (2016) Unified Champion Schools Program: Year 8 Evaluation Report 2015-2016. Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Boston.

8 Center for Social Development and Education (2015) Unified Strategy for Schools: Year 7 Evaluation Report 2014-2015. Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Boston.

# CHANGING SCHOOL CLIMATES

Unified Champion Schools promote a socially inclusive school climate that helps students with intellectual disabilities become a part of the school community:<sup>7</sup>

- 92% of Unified Champion School liaisons observe that the Unified Schools strategy **helps raise awareness about students with intellectual disabilities in the school.**
- 93% of school liaisons reported that Unified Champion Schools has made a big impact in **creating a more inclusive school environment in which students are open to and accepting of differences**, and that it increases the sense of community in the school.
- 99% of school staff, specifically the liaisons, feel the **Unified Champion Schools program is valuable for their school as a whole.**

These schools not only change the attitude of other students toward students with disabilities, the culture of the entire school shifts to one that is more welcoming and engaged.

- 86% of liaisons feel the Special Olympics Unified Schools strategy has **made a big impact in reducing bullying and teasing in their schools.**<sup>7</sup>
- Preliminary evidence suggests that Unified Champion schools perform better than other schools on most school climate dimensions such as **respect for diversity, social and civic learning, and school connectedness and engagement.**<sup>9</sup>

## UNIFIED CHAMPION SCHOOLS AND STAFF PERCEPTIONS

Staff of Unified Champion Schools perceived their school community to have higher levels of:



### **social and emotional security**

Where students feel safe from verbal abuse, teasing and exclusion



### **social and civic learning**

Where students feel supported in the development of social and civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions including: effective listening, conflict resolution, self-reflection and emotional regulation, empathy, personal responsibility, and ethical decision making.



### **respect for diversity**

Where there is mutual respect for individual differences (e.g. gender, race, culture, etc.) at all levels of the school—student-student; adult-student; adult-adult and overall norms for tolerance.



### **school connectedness and engagement**

Where there is positive identification with the school and norms for broad participation in school life for students, staff, and families.

<sup>9</sup> 2015 Social Inclusion Research Project, a Project UNIFY-NCSS Study 2015 New York, NY: National School Climate Center.

These findings demonstrate how Unified Champion schools provide benefits to all students. In fact, 67% of seniors felt their involvement in Unified Champions Schools had an influence on their decision about their future and 70% of seniors expressed desire to participate In Special Olympics after high school graduation.<sup>7</sup>

For more research on the Unified Champion Schools, check out the full [2015-2016 evaluation report](#).

**KEY FINDINGS:**  
SPECIAL OLYMPICS UNIFIED CHAMPION SCHOOLS RESEARCH



There is a **strong relationship** between school connectedness and important outcomes such as regular school attendance and staying in school.<sup>5</sup>



Children with disabilities are **two to three times** more likely to be bullied than their peers without disabilities.<sup>3</sup>



**92%** of school liaisons and administrators feel that the Special Olympics Unified Strategy has made a big impact in creating a more inclusive school environment.<sup>7</sup>



**86%** of liaisons feel the Unified Schools strategy has made a big impact in reducing bullying and teasing in their schools.<sup>7</sup>



**97%** of high school seniors say that the Unified Champion School is changing their school for the better.<sup>7</sup>