



# Unified Esports and Fitness Guide for Schools

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Special Olympics  
**Unified Champion  
Schools®**

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# Table of Contents

Section 1: Introduction to Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools	4
Purpose of the Unified Esports & Fitness Guide .....	5
What is Unified Champion Schools? .....	5
Section 2: What It Is and Why You Should Do It	6
What is Unified Esports & Fitness?.....	7
Why Unified Esports & Fitness?.....	7
Section 3: Unified Esports & Fitness in the UCS Model	8
Resources to Incorporate Health and Fitness into Esports.....	9
Strategies for Incorporating Physical Activity into Esports .....	10
Unified Esports & Fitness: Challenges and Solutions .....	11
Inclusive Youth Leadership in Unified Esports & Fitness .....	12
Esports and Whole School Engagement .....	13
Strategies for Equity .....	14
Additional Resources .....	15







## SECTION 1:

# Introduction to Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools®



Special Olympics  
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# Purpose of the Unified Esports and Fitness Guide

The Unified Esports and Fitness Guide for Schools was developed to help Unified clubs and esports programs implement the 3-component model of Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools® (UCS). Readers will learn how to implement fitness, inclusive youth leadership, and whole school engagement components into esports programming.

## What is Unified Champion Schools?

Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools (UCS) is an education and sports-based program aimed at promoting social inclusion through intentionally planned and implemented activities that bring together individuals with and without intellectual disabilities (ID) in competition and training. It creates an inclusive campus environment for individuals of all abilities through 3 components:

- **Special Olympics Unified Sports®:** Unified Sports joins people with and without intellectual disabilities on the same team. It was inspired by a simple principle: training together and playing together is a quick path to friendship and understanding.
- **Inclusive Youth Leadership:** Students with and without intellectual disabilities work together to lead and plan advocacy, awareness, and other inclusive activities throughout the school year.
- **Whole School Engagement:** Awareness and education activities that promote inclusion and reach the majority of the school population.

## Language in this Guide:

- Special Olympics athlete, or athlete: individual with an intellectual disability
- Unified partner, or partner: individual without an intellectual disability





## SECTION 2:

# Unified Esports & Fitness in Schools: WHAT IT IS AND WHY YOU SHOULD DO IT



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# What is Unified esports & fitness?

A school-approved video gaming team or program that combines an approximately equal number of students with and without intellectual disabilities and incorporates some form of Unified fitness or physical activity. Unified esports & fitness may be implemented in a variety of school settings. Some examples include:

- Activity within an existing Unified club or class
- Recreational or competitive team as a part of a general school esports club or team
- Stand-alone extracurricular or interscholastic-style team

## Why Unified esports & fitness?

Unified esports & fitness programs can expand the pool of athletes and Unified partners participating in Special Olympics programming. Common outcomes among teammates include:

- New friendships and gained respect between people with and without ID
- Discovery that they are more alike than different
- Learning new life skills in the areas of strategy, teamwork, problem solving, and communication
- Shared learning through training and competition

Unified esports & fitness participants also develop personally and professionally through social and emotional learning (SEL). A study conducted by the University of California at Irvine's Connected Learning Lab found that students who participated in a North America Scholastic Esports Federation (NASEF) esports league experienced positive skill development in self-awareness, self-management, social-awareness, and relationship skills\*. The authors note the importance of the development of these skills as online communication is often toxic. They state that participation in esports has the potential to combat online toxicity, a common concern in online gaming.



\* Steinkuehler, C., Reitman, J., Gardner, R., Campbell, K., & Cho, A. Academic and Social-Emotional Learning in NASEF: Quantifying the Patterns in Qualitative Observations.



## SECTION 3:

# Unified Esports & Fitness in the Unified Champion Schools Model



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# Unified esports & fitness in the UCS Model

**Coach Education & Resources:** The “Coaching Unified Sports” course is available at no cost through the [NFHS Learning Center](#) for all coaches and assistant coaches for Unified Sports and Unified esports.

At the college level, Unified esports is commonly carried out through college clubs or Unified intramural sports on campus. [See 3 Ways to Play: Special Olympics Unified esports](#) for tips on Unified esports at the college level.

**Featured Resource: High 5 for Fitness:** [High 5 for Fitness](#) is a set of resources that help youth take control of their own fitness by making healthy choices. High 5 is available for ages 8-11, 12-14, and 15-21 who want to be fit! See the Educator’s Guide and Caregiver’s Guide on the High 5 for Fitness page for strategies to implement at school and at home.



# Unified esports & fitness in the UCS Model

## Strategies for Incorporating Physical Activity into Esports

This section addresses strategies to incorporate health & fitness in esports.

### Warm Up: 3-5 Minutes

Start each practice by getting your teammates moving before they play. Warm-up exercises should be “dynamic” meaning you move as you stretch. Select 3-5 exercises that focus on different muscles and do about 15 repetitions of each, or follow along with the videos.

**Resources to use:**

- [High 5 for Fitness cards, guides, and videos](#)
- [Dynamic Stretches Guide](#) and [Dynamic Stretch Videos](#)
- [School of Strength Video 1: Welcome and Warm Up](#)

### Active Practice: 4-6 Minutes

Take 1-3 short activity breaks during game play to get teammates moving. Select 2-3 exercises each break, focusing on endurance, strength, and balance.

**Resources to use:**

- [High 5 for Fitness cards, guides, and videos](#)
- [Fit 5 Cards](#) and [Fit 5 Videos](#)
- [School of Strength Videos 2-4](#)
- [Unified Fitness Kit Workout](#) and [Unified Fitness Kit Cards](#)

### Cool-Down: 3-4 Minutes

Make sure teammates get a chance to stretch out the muscles they used at practice. This includes the muscle groups used during the activity breaks, but also the muscles required for gaming. Select 3-5 stretches, focusing on flexibility.

**Resources to use:**

- [High 5 for Fitness cards, guides, and videos](#)
- [Fit 5 Cards](#) and [Fit 5 Videos](#)



# Unified Esports & Fitness: Challenges and Solutions

This table offers solutions to common challenges that esports coaches/advisors face when organizing esports activities.

CHALLENGE	EFFECT	SOLUTION	BENEFITS
<b>Staring at a screen</b>	<i>Headache</i>	Get up in between games and talk about a random topic or play a small game as a team; practice <u>mindfulness exercise</u> to release stress or tension.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Builds camaraderie</li> <li>• Gives your brain and mind a break/refresh</li> <li>• Allows for time to de-stress after a game</li> </ul>
<b>Sitting for extended periods of time</b>	<i>Bad posture and muscle pain</i>	Before, in between, and after games, get up and form a stretching circle. Designate someone to lead the team through a <b>dynamic stretching routine</b> .	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Builds team chemistry</li> <li>• Keeps muscles loose to avoid pain</li> <li>• Provides a leadership opportunity</li> </ul>
<b>Unhealthy snacks/drinks</b>	<i>Loss of focus/too energetic</i>	Discuss the benefit of drinking water and eating healthy snacks with the team. Educate the team on what healthy snacks they should bring to practice. Encourage using reusable water bottles and make a habit of bringing them to practice. See the High 5 for Fitness guide for recommendations on nutrition and hydration.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gives players ownership over the team</li> <li>• Creates healthy, life-long habits</li> </ul>

It is recommended to incorporate health and fitness activities during practice to instill positive, healthy habits in Unified esports. By taking a movement break, players and coaches can re-energize their bodies as they go into the next round of esports play. All programs are different, so cater any fitness offerings to the participants' interests.

# Inclusive Youth Leadership in Unified Esports & Fitness

Unified esports & fitness provides plenty of opportunities for students to show what they are capable of as leaders. When students fill leadership roles, they inspire themselves and others to become agents of change.

***“Being a leader allows me to show others that anything is possible.”***

- Natalie Green  
Former U.S. Youth Ambassador  
Special Olympics Utah athlete



Inclusive youth leadership looks different at each school. Youth can oftentimes be the most knowledgeable in these areas and can be the best fit to take on leadership roles in Unified esports & fitness programs at their school. **Below are some roles that youth leaders can take on to incorporate inclusive youth leadership into Unified esports & fitness programming.**

Note: Not every role may be required or necessary at your school, and any role could be filled by an athlete, partner, or a Unified pair.

## Unified esports fitness leader

A Unified esports fitness leader helps lead physical activity in team practices and educates, guides, and encourages their peers towards adopting healthy habits by setting an example.

## Recruitment captain

A recruitment captain is responsible for recruiting new athletes and partners from their school to participate in Unified esports & fitness. They should check-in with all members to ensure that their accessibility needs are being met. To ensure that people with and without ID are being recruited to play Unified esports, follow this [guide](#) that will help you recruit diverse leaders.

## Technology lead

The technology lead is responsible for supporting their peers on setting up technology and helping navigate accessibility needs within the game.



## Assistant coach or mentor

This leader is responsible for helping lead practices and choosing the skills the team will work on together. This student will need to analyze gameplay, understand where there is room for improvement, and then help each participant improve their skills. Students with more extensive esports or game playing experience may be ideal candidates to fill this type of role.

## Esports inclusion leaders

This leader is responsible for ensuring the team is using inclusive language both online and in-person, and leads team morale activities to build team camaraderie in the digital space.

## And more...

Finding leadership roles within Unified esports & fitness can sometimes organically. None of the above roles are required, but what is important is that every esports participant has the opportunity to explore and develop leadership skills through esports. To learn more about inclusive youth leadership, or find other examples for how to empower leaders to find their strengths, check out these [Inclusive Youth Leadership resources](#).

# Unified esports and Whole School Engagement

Whole school engagement is a great entry point to introduce more students to Special Olympics and encourage participation in the inclusion revolution.

## How to bring attention to Unified esports & fitness in your school:

1. Recognizing your Unified esports team/club: Recognize the team/club in the same fashion as other school esports or athletic teams: pep rallies, in the yearbook, monthly highlights, etc.
2. Unified esports experience: The team/club can coordinate a casual esports game night for those outside of the club to see what Unified esports is all about.
3. Inclusion campaigns: The team/club can lead a Spread the Word >> Inclusion campaign, possibly in partnership with another club/team on their campus.
4. Partner with other esports teams: If you have traditional esports teams at your school, invite them to schedule practice together.

# Strategies for Equity

When organizing Unified esports & fitness in your school, it is important to implement equitable opportunities so that all athletes and partners can participate. Here are some tips we have heard from Unified esports & fitness organizers on how to maintain equity and high levels of enjoyment.

1. **Create balanced teams:** This can be done by hosting an assessment where all interested and committed players come together and play a few games or complete skills challenges. Teams are then created by combining athletes and partners of similar ability level.
2. **Divisioning:** Teams can be bracketed based on skill, or elect to play recreationally.
3. **Educate: Set standards with the students early.** Encourage them to play to their highest skill level and educate them on the principle of meaningful involvement.



# Additional Resources

[Unified Champion Schools® Resources](#)

[NFHS Learn: Unified Sports Course](#)

[College Level Resources](#)

- [3 Ways to Play: Special Olympics Unified esports](#)

[Generation Unified](#)

- Stay up to date on the latest stories of youth and students leading the Special Olympics movement toward a world of meaningful inclusion.

## Health & Fitness Resources

- Webpages
  - a. [Special Olympics High 5 for Fitness](#)
  - b. [Special Olympics Fit 5 Program](#)
  - c. [Special Olympics Fitness for Sports Coaches resource page](#)
  - d. [Special Olympics School of Strength: Fitness Programs for Every Level](#)
- Guides
  - a. [High 5 for Fitness Educator's Guide](#)
  - b. [High 5 for Fitness Caregiver's Guide](#)
  - c. [Special Olympics North America Unified Champion Schools Fitness Guide](#)
  - d. [Special Olympics North America esports and Fitness Resource](#)
  - e. [Special Olympics Arizona esports Mobility Package](#)
  - f. [Special Olympics Oklahoma esports Mobility Training](#)
  - g. [Dynamic Stretches Guide](#)
  - h. [Special Olympics Strong Minds mindfulness exercise](#)

## Other resources listed in this document:

[Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools](#)

[How to Recruit for Diversity](#)

[Inclusive Youth Leadership Resources](#)

[Spread the Word >> Inclusion](#)

[The Principle of Meaningful Involvement](#)